

# UK: Lecturers strike at Sheffield College continues into fourth week

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Around 200 members of the University and College Union (UCU) at Sheffield's Further Education (FE) colleges are taking strike action against a below-inflation 2.5 percent pay award for 2021-2. Negotiations continue over a settlement for 2022-3 in the face of entrenched pay restraint by college employers as the cost-of-living crisis deepens.

UCU members at Sheffield College (SC) walked out on the January 20 and 30 of and February 1, 7, and 9. The strikes follow ballots that returned overwhelming 87 percent of "yes" votes in a turnout of 59 percent. This is well above the 50 percent turnout threshold mandated by draconian anti-strike laws in the UK. From January 23 Sheffield College staff have conducted a work to rule which includes working strictly to their contracted hours, refusing to make up work lost as a result of strike action and refusing to cover for absent colleagues.

The resistance to the de facto pay cut has been fuelled by the deepening hardship, insecure employment, and unbearable workloads confronting college staff.

The UCU conducted a survey in July last year titled, "On the breadline: The cost of living for England's college workers", based on feedback from 2,738 staff across 200 colleges. This showed how widespread the "heat or eat" phenomenon was within the profession, with two-thirds heating their homes less frequently and a quarter skipping meals.

Pay for college staff since 2009 has fallen by 35 percent resulting from year on year below inflation deals. The starting pay for a qualified FE lecturer is less than £26,000, far lower than the UK national average for wages for those in full-time employment of £33,000. Due to rising workloads, college staff now work an average of two days unpaid each week, according to a UCU report. Most hold insecure job

contracts.

While noting all of this, the UCU advanced a national pay claim of just 10 percent without making any concrete demands to reverse casualisation or unsustainable workloads. These highly exploitative practices have provided the basis for six-figure salaries for college principals.

College staff participated in 10 days of strike action at 29 further education (FE) colleges in England last September and October after the employers body Association of Colleges (AoC) recommended a pay award of 2.5 percent in June. Unlike teachers, the pay awards for FE lecturers are set by individual employers, rather than by central government, based on AoC recommendations.

The action followed a 90 percent vote to strike with a turnout of 58 percent of the membership, in what the union called "the biggest mandate for industrial action across English further education colleges". Following the strikes the UCU agreed settlements locally as low as 6 percent which were labelled as victories.

Sheffield College employs around 1,300 people across five sites in the city in northern England attended by over 13,000 students. The FE college prepares many working-class youth in the 16-to-18 age bracket who will enter vocational occupations or higher education.

Paul Simpson, director of Sheffield College, stated, "We have provided a pay award above that recommended by the national employer body for colleges, the Association of Colleges, every year since 2017/18. In 2021/22 we made a better offer at 2.5 percent than the Association of Colleges recommended. The College had a budget deficit in 2021/22 not a surplus.'

Julie Kelley, the UCU regional official, said, "It is

frankly insulting that Sheffield College thinks it can get away with offering staff just 2.5 percent when inflation is soaring and our members are being pushed into poverty. The college has millions in the bank and it can afford to make staff a realistic offer that will help them make ends meet. If we do not receive an improved offer from the college we will be forced to strike.”

But the claim advanced by the UCU in January was just 4 percent, less than half of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) lowest measure of inflation rate, currently standing at around 10.5 percent. This was after the union pointed out the college ran a surplus had more than £9 million in its bank account and held reserves of £52 million.

For this miserly figure to be presented as a counterclaim shows that the union was seeking to wrap up the dispute at minimal costs to the college employer and pre-empting the first strike at Sheffield College in ten years. It was only because the intransigent SC management was unprepared to offer these scraps that the UCU was obliged to ask its members to take action.

The demobilisation of the fight by college staff and its disaggregated nature is brought into sharper relief as educators in all four parts of the system—primary, secondary, further, and higher education—have been on strike in the city.

In Sheffield, University of Sheffield International College (USIC) workers are in dispute over pay with privately-owned Study Group, a contractor for the University of Sheffield (TUOS). Lecturers and other workers at both major universities in the city, TUOS, and Hallam, involved in running disputes over pensions, pay, inequality, and conditions.

The latest four days of strikes at USIC the first of their kind at a private education provider in the UK, were kept entirely separate from the recent day of action involving 70,000 UCU lecturers and staff at 150 universities and 300,000 educators on February 1. The action was called in relation to long running dispute over real terms pay cuts in the awards from last year and in protest at the Conservative government’s Strikes Bill to effectively outlaw strike action in key sectors including education.

UCU General Secretary Jo Grady intervened to overturn a mandate for indefinite strike action across universities nationally in favour of 18 days of rolling strike action in February and March in order to stem

mounting opposition. University staff have been offered an insulting 3 percent for 2022-3 and between 4 and 7 percent for 2023-4 from the University and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). Grady agreed to bring back a derisory 1 percent uplift on the offer and put it to an electronic vote last week, which has been rejected by an overwhelming majority of 80 percent. The UCU called for a rejection, but Grady described the offer as “welcome”. These tactics by the bureaucracy are designed to wear down the resistance and protect their partnership with the employers.

Staff at Sheffield College must evaluate the consequences of the UCU strategy for dissipating and derailing the dispute. Rank-and-file committees must be formed to allow lecturers to organise a militant struggle against the employers, joining with other educators across the country and internationally.

FE college in the UK have seen dramatic cut to per-student spending since 2010, as part of austerity measures imposed by parties of all political stripes at the local and national level. Despite small real terms increases in budgets in December, lecturers’ wages and conditions remain under attack.

The demands for further belt tightening on educators and budget restraints in the name of austerity must be opposed, in addition to the fight against the continued marketisation of the college system and the subordination of further education to the interests of the private sector and corporate profit.



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