

Scottish further education college staff strike against job losses

Steve James
27 June 2023

Further education (FE) lecturers in Glasgow and Edinburgh are on strike this week. Lecturers at City of Glasgow College (CoGC), in Scotland are in their fourth week of strike action against management's decision to remove 175 mostly teaching posts, of which up to 75 will be compulsory redundancies.

Staff at the college are striking four days a week.

CoGC is the largest college in Scotland, with 27,000 students and claims to be capable of catering for 40,000. Eight thousand students graduate each year. The compulsory sackings from the 1,200 staff are the first in the institution's history.

According to Educational Institute for Scotland-Further Education Lecturers Association (EIS-FELA), as well as job losses students at the college will have less time with lecturers, many of whom will have additional classes. More cuts are planned next year. The college, with an annual income of around £93 million and facing a budget shortfall of £6 million, has already dispensed with nearly all its Learning Support lecturers for students with additional needs.

The strikes at Edinburgh College also against job losses. The college has over 29,000 students across four campuses. Staff were told in February that as many as 186 staff were being targeted for redundancy, while courses were threatened with being cut. Workers held two days of strikes in February. Despite savings having been made elsewhere, threats of job losses remain. In March, EIS-FELA said 98 percent of cuts had already been made but that management were pressing ahead for sackings. Six workers are currently still facing the sack.

The funding crisis at the colleges is directly due to the actions of the Scottish National Party (SNP)/Green government in Edinburgh. Annual funding for 2023/24 for the entire sector, which employs 14,000 teaching

and support staff in 26 colleges, has been frozen at the same level 2022/23 despite inflation running at around 10 percent. All are seeking, one way or another to pass this cut on to staff and students. A token “additional” £26 million allocated last year to mitigate the blow was suddenly withdrawn by the Scottish government this May.

All colleges are impacted. Staff at Dundee and Angus College have been informed by local management that up to 32 jobs could be lost, about 5 percent of the teaching staff, to save £2.5 million this year. Courses are likely to be curtailed, including dance, cookery, construction and science. Compulsory redundancies are to begin at the end of June. Jim Metcalfe, principal of Fife College, which caters for 20,000 students, told the *Dundee Courier* in May, “The whole college sector in Scotland is facing some significant cuts to core funding and they should not be underestimated.” Staff are currently balloting on local industrial action.

Forth Valley College, with 13,500 students in campuses in Falkirk, Stirling and Alloa, announced in May its intention to cut courses, including evening classes, and lose up to 13 full time posts. A consultation process on the redundancies was due to be completed this month.

The University of Highlands and Islands, facing a £3 million shortfall, announced in May it intends to cut 50 jobs and reduce courses at its Perth campus. As of May 30, the college announced it was working closely with “our recognised trade unions and employee representatives” and had extended the consultation process until September. Approval for an “enhanced voluntary severance scheme” was being sought, while the fate of the onsite nursery is in question. Across the colleges, up to 80 counselling jobs are due to be axed in July.

Staff at all 26 colleges are working to rule in pursuit of a pay claim beyond the sub inflation deal currently being offered, for last year's pay round, by the Scottish government through the employers' group, College Employers Scotland. A miserable offer of a 2 percent pay rise was rejected late 2022. Such is the level of foot-dragging by EIS-FELA that FE staff were only balloted on industrial action this March. On a 53 percent turnout, 78 percent supported strike action and 94 percent supported action short of a strike.

A campaign based only on a boycott of student assessments and work-to-contract was eventually launched in May. EIS-FELA announced then that any escalation of the action would only be considered in time for “the new academic year in August”, over a year after the claim should have been resolved.

June 1, College Employers Scotland, made a “full and final” pay offer to both lecturers in EIS-FELA and support staff in the Unison, Unite and GMB unions. The two-year offer included a flat rate £2,000 rise for all staff this year, followed by a mere £1,500 next year. Both sums are under the real and projected rates of inflation even for the poorest paid workers. While the offer was rejected by EIS-FELA President, Anne Marie Harley, as “completely unacceptable”, like the trade union apparatus during recent strikes in the sector across Britain and internationally, its strategy is to fragment lecturers and staff. By keeping the struggles in one college separate from every other, isolating FE staff separate from related struggles in the universities, schools and every other sector of public and private workers, while adhering to the slowest possible timetable, EIS-FELA hope to exhaust opposition to the SNP's cuts.

EIS-FELA has only allowed isolated local industrial action against compulsory job losses, taken no action at all against other cuts and “voluntary severance” schemes. These invariably are an opportunity for managers to bully those they wish to drive out. Instead, EIS-FELA have encouraged a feeble email and letter writing campaign, encouraging workers and college students to write to their local members of the Scottish parliament. They claim that appeals to the same Scottish government that is implementing the cuts can change its attitude and encourage it to provide “emergency funding.”

Crucial cover for both the EIS-FELA leadership and

the government is provided by the pseudo-left groups.

An article in *Socialist Worker* June 1 on the CoGC dispute contained no criticism of EIS-FELA or the government. Ritchie Venton of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) went further. Venton tweeted of the CoGC dispute “It's beyond time the First Minister and Scottish Government stepped in to end this mayhem, telling [CoGC] Principal Paul Little; halt the redundancies, stop the assault on education—or get out!” By focusing on Paul Little, on a salary of around £200,000, Venton erased the role of SNP/Greens in gutting further education on behalf of big business.

Former SSP MSP, Frances Curran, currently a CoGC lecturer, took the same line. Speaking to the Stalinist *Morning Star*, she claimed Little's drive to sack 100 workers was somehow at odds with the policy of the Scottish government. Little, claimed Curran, “has totally ignored the ministerial letter directing colleges to work with trade unions and take note of the Scottish government's Fair Work agenda.” In other words, cuts and job losses are fine, so long as the trade unions agree to them, and the government is not held responsible.

Staff and students at Scotland's colleges who want to take up a genuine struggle in defence of jobs and further education can contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee here. The Committee's Twitter page is here.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)