

Teaching staff strike over University of Brighton plans to make over 100 workers redundant

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On May 4, the University of Brighton (UoB) announced plans to make over 100 of its teaching staff redundant in an attempt to save £18 million. A further 397 jobs are at risk.

University management blame double-digit inflation and the freeze in student tuition fees. They intend to proceed through “voluntary” redundancies but will make them compulsory if necessary. Cuts would mean huge staff reductions in subjects including art, media, education, architecture, engineering, humanities and sport science, greatly increasing the workloads of those who remain.

The UoB already has one of the poorest staff to student ratios in the higher education sector. Patricia McManus, a senior lecturer at the university, told ITV News the redundancies would make taking care of students and their education “impossible.”

University and College Union (UCU) members voted unanimously to ballot for strike action at an emergency branch meeting on May 12. But the union delayed any strike action until two months later, focusing on denunciations of senior management. A protest march held June 10 was little more than an exercise in blowing off steam.

More than 500 staff, students and supporters attended, with some making homemade placards calling for “Quality education not investors’ profits.” In contrast, the UCU made no remarks on the marketisation of higher education, for which it bears responsibility after refusing to mobilise against it going back years. Brighton UCU’s one demand was for the removal of vice chancellor Debra Humphris.

While slashing the workforce, Humphris aims to “grow student numbers” and increase revenue.

Drawing a salary of over £250,000—seven times the value of an average staff member—Humphris has presided over the withdrawal of countless university courses such as maths, chemistry and geography, resulting in a 15 percent reduction in the number of courses compared to 2017.

However, the removal of a vice chancellor alone cannot rectify the market-driven ravaging of higher education. As one lecturer at the demonstration said, “Professor Humphris should stand down—but, that said, the problem runs deeper than just one careerist. It’s a fundamental issue with the way we think about education in this country and the way in which it is funded.”

The UCU promotes a narrow outlook to justify its severely limited strike action. An indefinite strike only began July 3 once the vast majority of teaching had ended and students left campus for the summer break. Individual union members that called for strike action earlier on, and during graduation, were opposed by branch chair Mark Abel. Abel is a member of the Socialist Worker’s Party-dominated UCU Left and also on the union’s higher education committee (HEC) body.

Educators at the UoB only need look at the outcome at the University of Liverpool two years ago to see how their struggle will pan out if left under the control of the union bureaucracy. The “successful resistance” touted by Brighton UCU amounted to the union at Liverpool waving through 24 redundancies on the basis that this was a reduction from management’s previously demanded 47.

Like many other universities across the UK, Brighton UCU has set up crowd funds in place of offering strike

pay, even when universities have docked thousands of pounds in pay from staff for taking part in the national marking and assessment boycotts (MAB). One lecturer at the UoB lost over £3,000 in a single month for not marking students' work.

The marking and assessment boycott itself has been used as a substitute for powerful national strikes brought to a halt by the UCU. Its impact has been to impoverish staff while splitting that action into a series of weaker local disputes.

Brighton students' union is just as shameful as the UCU, releasing a statement at the end of June attacking university lectures along with management, demanding that "both parties come together to find a resolution."

Despite the position of the students' union, students have been fighting in solidarity with their lecturers, with 11 occupying the vice chancellor's office against the redundancies, standing up to threats of legal action by management. The occupiers tweeted: "where is @SUBrighton? a force meant to be dedicated to OUR welfare is nothing more than a UoB cheerleader."

The issues facing workers and students are by no means exclusive to the UoB. The University of East Anglia recently announced plans to save £45 million by making 113 staff redundant. Staff at the University of Kent and the British and Irish Modern Music Institute's (BIMM) Manchester, are also in danger of losing jobs.

The ongoing attack on higher education has been facilitated by the UCU, after decades in which it has overseen defeats on pensions, pay and conditions. While universities made a total revenue of £2.6 billion, the highest for at least four years, staff expenditure is at a record low, at just 51 percent.

Following the 2008 global financial crash, Gordon Brown's Labour government introduced an austerity programme that was continued by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010. In the space of a few years, thousands of job losses were imposed at higher education institutions without the UCU lifting a finger in opposition, with the only caveat being that management impose "voluntary" redundancies—in collaboration with the union—instead of them being compulsory. The *World Socialist Web Site* covered these events [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

The penetration of free market principles into higher education, rapidly accelerated with the passage of the Higher Education (HE) and Research Act in 2017, is

incompatible with the provision of high quality education. Students are being transformed into cash cows and educators increasingly heavily exploited to ensure the largest yearly turnover of numbers possible, with the quality of teaching inevitably suffering.

University management meanwhile enact corporate-style restructuring plans, targeting "uneconomic" courses and jobs. The UoB is currently carrying out an expensive programme of infrastructure redevelopment. UCU regional official Michael Moran pointed to its spending £50 million on new buildings: "It is inexplicable that Brighton University is moving to sack over 100 employees whilst squandering tens of millions of pounds on shiny new buildings."

The south coast university closed its Hastings campus in 2019 and is closing its Eastbourne campus, developing a new one on Lewes Road, Brighton, with plans for further development at the main campus in Falmer. The university recently bought Virgin Active's former lease at Falmer in order to redevelop the site for its sport and health science courses.

To the degree these developments actually benefit the majority of the student body—rather than, as is often the case, serving only to attract high-spending students from wealthy families—they should not come at the cost of teaching staff. Counter-posing the two as the UCU does encourages students and staff to accept a zero-sum game on the basis of the government's woeful underfunding of higher education. Massive investment is required to fund both a full complement of tutors and the classrooms and facilities required for teaching, not just at Brighton but at every institution.

But this demands a massive struggle throughout the sector challenging the market principles and strip-back of university education being led by the Tory government. It requires that control of the university and college worker struggles be taken out of the hands of the UCU bureaucracy and placed in the hands of the membership, organised through rank-and-file committees. Workers who agree should contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee today.



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