

UK: Sheffield Hallam University workers vote for strike action against mass job cuts

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Lecturers at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in northern England have voted for industrial action by an overwhelming majority to oppose mass job losses, reduced pay, and inferior terms and conditions. A majority of members of the University and College Union (UCU) participated in the ballot which resulted in 86 percent voting for strike action, on a 53 percent turnout.

The lecturers are showing their determination to oppose compulsory redundancies, onerous teaching workloads, and the introduction of new lower-wage teaching roles that are being imposed by SHU in response to a severe financial crisis.

University management have imposed several waves of job losses, with a new voluntary redundancy scheme starting this month affecting 400 professional services jobs.

This follows the previous forcing through of 80 compulsory redundancies among academic staff, with more positions under threat of voluntary redundancy and regrading to lower-paid positions. Alongside this, management is imposing increased workloads and lowering the standard of education.

In December last year, the university announced a voluntary severance scheme which saw around 140 senior academics leave their jobs. In March, senior staff at Sheffield Hallam University were issued with “risk of redundancy” letters and given two weeks to apply for redundancy as the grade 9 principal lecturer role is removed.

Many staff face demotion by being pressured to take up a role at a lower grade, in what amounts to fire-and-rehire practices. The responsibilities of lower grades will be increased, and a new academic tutor position at grade 6 will be created, in violation of the national framework agreement according to the University and

College Union (UCU).

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to staff at Sheffield Hallam. A non-academic worker said, “they’re making senior academics redundant now but we’re concerned that the axe is coming for us next.” Her fears were confirmed with the subsequent announcement of more job cuts.

Another professional services employee said, “We’re worried about our jobs here, even though the other university is still hiring, there’ll be fewer opportunities for young people coming up. There’s a big problem with university finances across the whole country, but here they’ve built new buildings with no plan for the inflation or falling student numbers.”

An older technician said, “They’re saving money by regrading people onto lower wages. I’m very critical of the union because they take all that money and get three figure salaries—and for what? When people are victimised, like the Horizon scandal at the post office, they sit and do nothing. I’ve been through several of these waves of job cuts in the past. The university ... has based itself on international students’ money, and now these are going.”

SHU is one of two research universities in the city and has over 30,000 students and 5,000 staff, making it the 14th biggest in the country. Its research strategy focuses on data technologies, environmental sustainability and advanced clinical technology.

The new attack on workers is caused by a financial shortfall created by mismanagement at SHU that takes place in the context of wholesale funding reductions across the UK higher education (HE) system.

SHU management have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on their “Campus Masterplan” agenda of constructing new buildings and pandering to the needs of big business in order to attract investment, while

taking advantage of their exploited staff who provide the services on which the university is based. It has spent over £40 million on three new buildings as part of its Howard Street construction project in Sheffield city centre.

The university is also creating a new London campus which is expected to open next year and will teach around 5,000 students by the end of the decade. The new campus is part of an £8 billion Brent Cross redevelopment in Barnet, London.

Profiteering

Broader political and economic factors are affecting the higher education sector. Universities are struggling to attract students, particularly international students who pay sky-high fees, who are being affected by draconian attacks on immigration rights. The global economic crisis and rising inflation and energy costs have also impacted universities.

The situation at SHU is replicated at dozens of universities across the country. The ruling class is transforming the higher education system into an arena for profiteering in the interests of big business. By gutting government spending and introducing tuition fees, beginning under the Labour government of Tony Blair in 1998, the way has been paved for the marketisation of universities to serve the interests of the financial oligarchy.

Tensions between workers and management exist across higher education institutions, with strike ballots or industrial action underway at many.

Last month, staff at Goldsmiths voted by a large majority to oppose huge job cuts at the London-based campus that would nearly halve the number of lecturers in arts and humanities and other subjects. In the Midlands, University of Lincoln workers are balloting to decide whether to walk out over plans to axe a tenth of posts. In the South, workers at Winchester University held a one-day strike followed by the starting of a period of work-to-rule.

But the University and College Union (UCU) are dividing and isolating these disputes, having sold out a years-long dispute in higher education and paving the

way for this latest round of attacks across the sector. Even during the national dispute, the union did everything it could to keep the fight at SHU separate, calling separate strike days on multiple occasions.

The UCU's policy is for collaboration with the university management and the government in backroom deals to the detriment of staff conditions. Jo Grady, the general secretary of UCU, who recently awarded herself a massive pay rise following the UCU sellout of the higher education strikes, has politely appealed to the university "to urgently take stock and change course."

As an apparent gesture of goodwill, no strike dates have yet been announced. A tiny demonstration was organised on April 24, featuring speeches from local union bureaucrats from UNISON and the Sheffield Trades Union Congress.

Lecturers must learn the lessons of the sell-out of the 2019–2023 higher education strikes, part of a series of major industrial disputes across the country that were sold out by the union bureaucracy. The unions involved in the sector, including UCU and Unison, artificially separated different parts of the workforce and isolated their disputes.

The death knell of that struggle was the decision by the UCU leadership to allow branches to make separate decisions about whether to go back to work, which resulted in less than one-third of universities continuing the strike. Workers' militancy was systematically worn down.

A new perspective is required to break free from the deadening stranglehold of the UCU bureaucracy. SHU staff must take up the fight to link their dispute with non-academic staff and workers at other institutions.

This struggle must not limit itself to disparate, one-day actions, but bring in education workers in secondary, primary, and further education as part of a rank-and-file rebellion against the corporatist trade union leadership and a turn out to workers and young people in a fight to defend high-quality university education as a social right.



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