

Mass jobs cull continues at UK universities

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A wave of mass job losses is engulfing UK universities, with higher education the latest public service suffering from the Labour government's austerity agenda. The cuts are exemplified by Cardiff University, which has announced plans to eliminate 400 full-time posts, around 7 percent of all jobs.

Cardiff University is the largest university in Wales with over 32,000 students. It is a member of the prestigious Russell Group, indicating that the major financial crisis in higher education is affecting more than the smaller and less well-funded institutions.

The University and College Union (UCU) pointed to the university's £500 million in financial reserves in an effort to persuade management that the job losses are avoidable. However, the cuts are not simply a response to a short-term crisis but part of a long-term plan to restructure the university along the lines of a profitable business.

As it has done in all disputes over job losses since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the UCU has only said that it opposes *compulsory redundancies*, meaning that job losses can be made on a supposedly voluntary basis. The university borrowed the same line and said that it would cut jobs through voluntary redundancies unless "absolutely necessary." This an absurd claim when the university plans to close entire courses—including nursing, modern languages and music—and reduce staffing levels across almost every discipline.

Cardiff University also plans to reduce its intake of UK students, while stating explicitly in its consultation document that student to staff ratios will increase "in order to achieve financial sustainability." It suggests increased ratios "will pose some immediate challenges and will require adaptations to workload" for remaining workers; a euphemism for yet another increase to already high workloads.

The Cardiff cuts are just the tip of the iceberg. Durham University is also planning to cut 200 jobs this year, Newcastle University is cutting 300 and Queen's University Belfast has opened a voluntary severance scheme which unions say could cut 270 jobs. UCU

members have voted to strike against the threat of job losses at the University of Dundee and the University of Sheffield International College, and a ballot is running at the University of East Anglia.

Worse is yet to come, as the Office for Students projects that three-quarters of universities will be in deficit this year, and one quarter are already making budget and staff cuts. The *Times Higher Education* reported that 10,300 jobs were lost across the whole sector during the 2023-24 academic year, "up from 7,300 the year before, and an average of 100 per institution."

These were the figures from the 103 universities that have posted financial accounts. Between them they have spent more than £200 million on severance pay, showing they are "investing" their financial reserves in cutting as many jobs as possible like corporate asset-strippers.

Up to 10,000 further jobs could go this year with almost one in four leading universities cutting budgets and reducing staff. The *Guardian* noted Saturday that "About 90 universities are currently restructuring alongside compulsory and voluntary redundancy schemes to lower their wage bills."

The Starmer government has made clear it will do nothing to prevent institutions from making major cuts in order to remain "competitive." Baroness Jacqui Smith, Labour's Minister for Skills in the Department for Education, has repeatedly made clear that universities are to be included in the government's plans for austerity and attacks on migrants.

Labour is able to push ahead thanks to its partnership with the trade unions, which it relies on to suppress workers' opposition to cuts and intensified exploitation. Nowhere was this clearer than in a fawning interview of Smith by the UCU's general secretary Jo Grady, posted on the union's YouTube channel on Wednesday.

The video was an apologia for Labour, despite the viciously anti-working-class policies pushed through in its first six months in power. UCU members were asked to submit questions to the minister, and told "Together we can influence the government to take action."

But in her enthusiastic introduction, Grady was unable to point to a single positive action of the government, claiming that the main benefit of Labour over the Conservatives was a “clear tone shift” and that “At least we are in dialogue now... we don’t feel under constant attack.” She is speaking for the union bureaucracy, not workers.

Smith was given ample room to promote the government’s forthcoming education white papers and made vague promises that “unproductive competition” would be replaced with more collaboration and cooperation between universities—likely a veiled reference to suggestions that universities merge or share services to further cut staff.

When finally asked about the financial crisis and job cuts, Smith claimed that, as universities are supposed to be autonomous, it was inappropriate to even ask her about Coventry University—where the vice-chancellor was given an £80,000 bonus despite the threat of 300 job losses.

Echoing the 2010 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government’s justification of the “age of austerity,” Smith feigned sympathy with higher education workers facing mass job losses but insisted, “We have inherited an enormously difficult fiscal position.” She reiterated, “There will not be a major reform of the way that we fund higher education. ... There is not going to be a large injection of taxpayers’ money.”

The door was left open for imposing a greater burden on students and graduates with further increases to tuition fees.

Smith also ruled out reversing restrictions introduced last year on international students bringing dependents to the UK—despite absurdly claiming to have abandoned the Tories’ demonisation of migrants. She took the opportunity to state that Labour must “demonstrate an understanding of the impact of migration.”

The resources and technology which exist in modern society could easily make the higher education sector a source of good jobs and quality education, but this will not happen through any amount of pressure on the Labour government, which is committed to reshaping society entirely in the interests of the rich.

The UCU and the other unions are working to keep the many local disputes against job losses isolated, avoiding any confrontation with its Labour “partners” in government. Hence their opposition only to compulsory redundancies and insistence on “consultation” over cuts—to save face while agreeing to the jobs massacre made inevitable by Labour’s policies.

UCU members already voted in a consultative ballot at the start of December to take industrial action for a 5.5 percent pay increase. The same month, its Higher Education Committee voted to begin the balloting process for a strike that could take place in April.

But not until the last week, as the scale of job losses became clear, did the union say anything about organising any fight. And this had nothing to do with organising the industrial strength of tens of thousands of HE workers, but centred on appeals to the Labour government to do the right thing. Posting on X on January 28, Grady pleaded, “We have a Labour government in Wales. We have a Labour government in Westminster. Our political leaders must intervene.”

The same day, Grady, seeking to contain growing anger at the jobs cull, was cited in the *Times* saying, “If vice-chancellors do not step back from the brink and work with us to protect jobs, serious industrial unrest cannot be ruled out.”

The offensive by the employers is a result of the abject sellout by the UCU of national strikes over pay, conditions, jobs and pensions going back almost a decade, culminating in a sellout of strikes held during the 2022-24 UK strike wave.

If education and every other gain of the working class are to be defended, it must be in a direct rebellion against the union bureaucracy and the Labour government, waged through the organisation of the rank and file. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was formed to organise workers for this struggle; we urge higher education workers to get in touch today.



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