

University of Sheffield International College strike suspended by union

Our reporters
21 February 2025

A planned strike by academic and administrative staff at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC) over compulsory redundancies has been suspended, potentially until March.

University and College Union (UCU) members had voted to strike on 10 alternate days, beginning February 12 and ending March 10, to prevent the education provider Study Group making 36 compulsory redundancies among lecturers, administrative and student support staff.

Study Group issued their demand for compulsory redundancies in November. In January workers voted to strike if the private education provider did not withdraw the threat. On a turnout of 72 percent, every single vote cast backed strike action. The number of workers employed at USIC fluctuates according to the numbers of students enrolled but before the redundancies the workforce numbered around 100.

Between November and February, intense pressure from Study Group management forced a large percentage of workers under threat of redundancy, and even some who were not, to conclude that they had no alternative but to take “voluntary redundancy”. There was little voluntary about it, with only a minimal financial statutory compensation package in return. By all accounts, Study Group have treated the workforce in general and individual workers during “consultation” meetings with utter disdain.

Other workers at USIC, also under severe pressure from management, have been redeployed within Study Group’s UK and online operations. Some have been effectively demoted, not only with a concomitant loss of salary but with an increase in responsibilities. Almost all of these same workers have been forced to take four-week trials in new posts that are in flux due to the large cuts to workforce numbers and corporate

restructuring. With so many jobs culled, heavier workloads and responsibilities await staff shortly down the line.

Study Group issued an email to USIC staff on the eve of the planned strike using terms like “minimised” and “all but avoided” regarding compulsory redundancies. But four workers still face this ultimatum should they reject their new redeployed post after their four-week trial period comes to an end in March.

An emergency UCU branch meeting was called on February 11 with strike action set to begin on February 12. But at the meeting union representatives, both from the branch and the regional office, painted the strike as a futile exercise under the new circumstances.

Union reps claimed a strike would not look good in students’ eyes now that fewer compulsory redundancies were in the pipeline, despite admitting that the job losses—“voluntary” or otherwise—would “increase staff workload and reduce the quality of academic and pastoral support our students receive”. They also claimed that palpable anger amongst the workforce would not be conducive to strike action! By this ridiculous benchmark, no strikes would ever take place.

The simple fact that the strike mandate still clearly stood—because the employer had not withdrawn all compulsory redundancies—was not seriously acknowledged and instead a motion was moved to suspend the strike. The UCU did the work of the employer by utilising Study Group’s misleading narrative and inculcating the meeting with a sense of futility. A wait-and-see attitude was adopted even as Study Group continue to operate in a belligerent manner towards the workforce.

Emboldened by the suspension of the strike, Study Group stated that cuts were necessary because of a fall

in international student numbers. “Like many universities and higher education providers, we need to adapt staffing to recent changes in international recruitment,” they said, continuing, “Regrettably at Sheffield this means reducing employee numbers. As educators, we welcome the decision to suspend the strikes and avoid detriment to our students’ education.”

UCU branch chair, Sam Morecroft, later told the BBC that “staff had either taken voluntary redundancy or been redeployed”. Morecroft said the strike would go ahead in March if there was no guarantee that compulsory redundancies would be avoided. But if the union is not prepared to defend the four remaining workers when armed with a strong strike mandate, why should it be expected to authorise a fight weeks later.

At the branch meeting, union representatives suggested a couple of “leverage” style actions instead, including censuring the Study Group directors involved in negotiations with the UCU and lobbying the University of Sheffield to take USIC in-house. Morecroft told the BBC that Study Group should be “ashamed” of their actions. These tactics would prove as useful as a chocolate teapot, based on the thoroughly bogus premise that the very well remunerated Study Group and the University of Sheffield management care about anything other than the bottom line.

The University of Sheffield recently closed its world-renowned Archaeology department and is closing Masters courses as part of its own cost-cutting agenda. Nationally, thousands of jobs are at risk, adding to the tens of thousands already shed just in the last few years.

USIC workers must prepare to take the dispute out of the hands of the UCU leadership which is sabotaging a fightback even as management states that its job cuts programme must still go ahead.

Study Group learned all they need to know about the UCU bureaucracy when USIC workers went on strike in November 2022 and January 2023 demanding a 12 percent pay increase. Immediately after the first strike, the union retreated to a “reasonable and achievable” 9 percent demand—substantially below RPI inflation. Finally, the UCU offered Study Group a sellout deal of 8 percent in 2023 and 2 percent in 2024—in effect a 6 percent pay cut in 2022 and another cut in 2024.

The ongoing assault by employers on higher education workers is the result of the trade union leadership’s sellout of national strikes in a protracted

dispute over wages, conditions and pensions going back almost a decade, brought to an ignominious end during the 2022-24 UK strike wave.

As with the previous strikes, in this dispute there are no calls for solidarity from UCU members in the wider University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University, or throughout the higher education sector. This most basic requirement for a serious struggle can only be taken by workers themselves, organised through a rank-and-file committee.

Education and all the cultural gains of the working class must be defended and extended, which can only be done by prising the death grip of the trade union bureaucracy off workers’ struggles. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was formed to aid workers in this battle; we urge higher education workers at USIC and throughout the sector to get in touch.



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