

Jobs cull at universities in Wales, part of over 10,000 losses UK wide

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Welsh universities are cutting hundreds of jobs, including 400 redundancies and the closure of courses at Cardiff University. This slash-and-burn campaign takes place with the direct collaboration of the Welsh government led by the Labour Party.

More than half of the universities across Britain have announced thousands of job cuts. Higher education workers have begun to resist, with three weeks of strikes having begun at Dundee University against 200-500 jobs cuts, and workers at Newcastle University and Brunel University striking during March/April against hundreds of cuts.

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at the University of East Anglia have voted by 82 percent to strike, and a ballot is open at the University of Sheffield where as many as 1,000 staff face redundancy. Ballots are also going ahead at Durham University over plans to cut £20 million from the university's staffing budget and Keele University over £2.25 million in cuts involving job losses in its School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Business School.

Stopping the destruction of large parts of higher education will require workers to confront the Labour Party and its partners in the trade union bureaucracy. Any notion that Labour can be pressured to defend education is refuted by the experience of the cuts at Cardiff.

Cardiff plans to shut down its courses in nursing—amid an NHS staffing crisis—music, modern languages and ancient history. Some staff have reportedly been told that if they want to keep their jobs they should prepare to teach at the university's campus in Kazakhstan!

Staff cuts mean increases in class sizes. It is already common in UK universities that students cannot fit in

lecture rooms and have to watch on a screen from another room, or lecturers have to give the same lecture twice to different groups. The vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia told *THE* (formerly, Times Higher Education) that increasing class sizes is “one of the easiest ways to improve efficiency and boost productivity”.

There is mass public opposition. Almost 20,000 people have signed a petition to save Cardiff's School of Nursing, and a petition for the School of Music has over 25,000 signatures.

Cardiff's is one of only two scholarly music studies courses in Wales. The department, Professor Ian Pace told *THE*, is “home to arguably the UK's leading scholars of Liszt, Stravinsky and Janá?ek, not to mention pioneering, world-leading scholars of Mendelssohn, historical performance, music in Vienna, and both 19th- and 20th-century French music and opera.”

Around half the job cuts will come from the merger and “reshaping” of other departments, including the School of Mathematics, which will become part of the new School of Data Science, Mathematics and Computing. This is despite the fact that universities tend to make a profit on maths students, who need little beyond a blackboard and a mathematician to learn.

Such cuts to “pure” and exploratory science will be driven by the calculation that courses based on AI and data science can take more of the lucrative market for one-year masters, charging enormous fees to international students.

More than 3,000 scientists and mathematicians, including two Nobel prize-winners in physics and 17 Fields medallists (a mathematics prize as prestigious as the Nobel) signed an open letter warning the cuts could be “the beginning of the end of pure and applied

mathematics research and teaching". The letter notes, "Mathematics is the foundation and fuel of AI ... Separating mathematical scientists in the proposed new structure is a short-sighted move that will put Cardiff on the back foot in this rapidly developing field."

As well as the 400 cuts at Wales's only Russell Group university (a leading public research institution) in Cardiff, another 200 cuts are planned at Bangor University. Aberystwyth University's recent financial report noted "increased use of a revolving credit facility". The University of Wales Trinity Saint David will stop offering undergraduate degrees at its historic campus in Lampeter—the first higher education institution in Wales—and older than every English university apart from Oxford and Cambridge.

The UCU has a track record of collaborating with management in job losses, provided they can proceed on a "voluntary" not compulsory basis. Many thousands of jobs have already been cut in the last 15 years in this way.

The union refuses to organise any nationally co-ordinated industrial action to fight the jobs cull—in which over 10,000 of its members jobs are on the chopping block—instead launching a feeble "Stop the Cuts" initiative last week. The campaign's main purpose is to divert members' anger into bankrupt appeals to the pro-big business Labour government of Sir Keir Starmer.

Opposed to industrial action with the potential to bring university sector to a standstill, the UCU instead proposes a March 18 rally and parliamentary lobby, and for a national demonstration in London, even later and virtually as term ends, on May 10. Its goals are to "demonstrate the current dire conditions in UK universities and the consequences of government inaction"—as if everyone is not already aware—and that the "UCU will put pressure on the UK government to change their current position and invest and intervene to alleviate the crisis in higher education."

But Starmer's right-wing government has made clear it will not prevent widespread destruction of jobs in higher education. Minister for Skills Baroness Jacqui Smith pledged that "there will not be a major reform of the way in which we fund higher education."

The new chair of the universities regulator Office for Students (OfS), Edward Peck, told MPs last week that bailing out universities in financial difficulties would

create a "moral hazard" and risk "universities and colleges and other providers becoming public sector organisations, which I think we want to avoid."

Labour's response to the crisis in Welsh universities has been a mixture of denial, token measures and attempts to exclusively blame Cardiff University's leadership.

Vikki Howells, the Minister for Further and Higher Education in the Welsh government, announced £18.5 million in additional funding, but *not* to save jobs. The funding is earmarked to be spent on "estates maintenance" and digital projects to reduce operating costs, which only means it will free up more money to be used on paying redundancy costs and other measures to cut the staffing bill.

Much has been made of plans to change Competition and Marketing Authority rules on collaboration between universities, which can only mean sharing services to cut administrative jobs.

In a Senedd debate on February 5, Howells denied that there was even a crisis, declaring "Our universities in Wales are not underfunded. OECD data suggests that universities in the UK are some of the best funded in the world."

Claiming restricting social spending was the only option, she said "even if we were to cut grants for students or divert funding away from the NHS, schools or local government to increase funding for our universities, as some Members opposite would have us do, universities would still need to change in response to external challenges". The military budget, being increased by at least £6 billion a year from 2027, was not mentioned by a single member as an alternative source of funds.

For its part, Plaid Cymru, the nationalist Party of Wales, suggested that more funding could be taken out of students' pockets by "recaptur[ing] around £34 million from maintenance grants that currently go to the 40 percent of Welsh students who study outside Wales".



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