

# Lecturers strike at Sheffield Hallam University over unpaid wages

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Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at Sheffield Hallam University held a two-day strike Monday and Tuesday to demand unpaid wages. Their action was in response to the deferral of a nationally agreed 2.7 percent pay rise for the 2024/25 academic year and university management's refusal to include backdated payments.

Following an overwhelming mandate from its members, the UCU announced a series of strike dates. Seeking to prevent the action, management implemented the award this month—four earlier than initially scheduled. But this came without any back pay for the preceding seven months, the core grievance of the dispute.

The seven-month period of withheld pay, estimated by the UCU to equate to approximately £100 per month for the average lecturer, is a significant financial loss. And this is only the latest issue in a decade-and-a-half of below-inflation pay rises and mushrooming workloads.

Speaking to the press, Dr. Bob Jeffrey, a sociology lecturer participating in the strike, underscored the link between staff welfare and the quality of education: “Staff’s working conditions are students’ learning conditions”. He also drew attention to the long-term trend of pay increases lagging behind inflation, resulting in a substantial reduction in real pay over the past fifteen years.

Speaking to the media, one of the pickets described “the anger, the frustration—to be honest, the level of exhaustion—in staff.”

A voluntary severance scheme which led to the departure during 2024 of around 500 academic and professional services staff—over 10 percent of the workforce—had created “huge holes in the institution and obviously it’s affected student experience,” another picket said.

Tom, a senior lecturer in games design, told our reporters: “We’re striking today to push back against

theft of our pay. Essentially, university management made the decision to withhold a chunk of our government-mandated pay rise.

“Looking at our salaries, we are already way behind inflation. The pay rise doesn’t even nearly plug that gap anyway. And this year, we’re being told we’re not getting a chunk of that money because according to the university, they can’t afford to pay us.

“The university is making huge investments in lovely shiny new buildings we can see from here, and a London campus we’re not even sure they can afford to run.

“But it’s us who are teaching the students. It’s us who are delivering the teaching experience. And it’s us who’ve seen a degradation in our working standards over the last several years. And now this, which comes as a bit of a kick in the teeth.

“We’re not the only university local UCU branch that’s having to go on strike because of cuts to staff cuts to pay, but not every university is withholding our pay like here at Hallam.

“The market philosophy for higher education just isn’t working. And you can see that play out not just here at Hallam, but right across the entire sector, across the whole country.

“We’ve had a massive swathe of voluntary severance over the last couple of years as a cost saving measure, which has caused huge gaps in our teaching staff.

“In my area we’re dramatically understaffed and still being encouraged to teach more and more students. There are people on zero-hours contracts or who are being hired on 18-month contracts with no guarantee of renewal.

“We are having to pick up that slack, and in a lot of cases, being thrown into teaching that we’ve no time to adequately prepare for.”

As Tom explains, the situation at Sheffield Hallam University is not unique. There is a huge financial crisis confronting the entire higher education sector. As was

reported by WSWs last year of job cuts in the hundreds at Hallam and the University of Sheffield:

As part of desperate attempts to fend off bankruptcy, 76 higher education institutions are imposing restructuring and redundancy plans, according to an official report by the Office for Students, a UK government regulator.

They forecast a £3.4 billion black hole for 2025-26, with teaching-focussed institutions worst affected. Many higher education institutions face massive job losses and mergers to survive.

Government funding to universities has fallen substantially, from around £8 billion in 2000 to just over £6 billion in 2022-3 (in real terms). Starting in 1998 under the Blair Labour government, a system of student tuition fees was introduced, shifting the burden onto the individual student and forcing institutions to compete for them in a market system. Income from tuition fees has risen from £61 billion in 2000 to £107 billion in 2022-3.

This is part of a deliberate policy encouraging the private sector to make major inroads into higher education. Universities are increasingly run according to a “business model” which prioritises income generation rather than a holistic approach to education as a social good.

Integral to the model is universities recruiting overseas students, who pay considerably higher fees. However, international student numbers are rapidly falling after years of Tory hostility to migrants now continued by the Labour Party. Student visa applications were down by 16 percent in 2024 compared to the previous year. At the same time, domestic student recruitment increased by just 1.3 percent, far below the forecasted rate of 5.8 percent.

According to *THE*, in February, 90 of the UK’s 166 universities were making redundancies, including the closure of entire departments. This is coupled with a rise in the use of “zero hours” contracts, under which university staff have no security of employment. Pay for academic staff has stagnated or gone backwards in real terms.

The present situation confronting university staff is a direct result of these policies, but they have only been successful due to the UCU’s failure to defend the pay, jobs and conditions of its members. This is not due to any lack of willingness to fight on the part of university staff,

who have repeatedly demonstrated their readiness to take action, including in a series of national strikes since 2018.

In the face of a wave of job losses, and the closure of entire departments, the UCU proposes nothing except futile appeals to Sir Keir Starmer’s government to “invest and intervene to alleviate the crisis in higher education.”

The few strikes currently being sanctioned by the union bureaucracy over pay and jobs are being treated as separate struggles, although the underlying causes are the same everywhere. The various unions representing university workers in non-academic roles have acted in the same way.

New organisations of struggle and a new perspective are needed. Rank-and-file committees should be established in the universities uniting academic and non-academic staff and students and linking up across the UK and with fellow education workers internationally who face similar attacks. These committee would take the fight to defend pay, jobs and conditions into their own hands and away from the deadening control of the union bureaucracy.

Education is a fundamental democratic right for all and should not depend on the ability of a student to pay exorbitant fees, saddling themselves with tens of thousands of pounds of debt. The source of the present crisis in higher education lies in the capitalist system, which prioritises private profit above all and which can find money for armaments and war, but not for essential social provisions such as education, health, and housing.

A socialist policy for education would ensure that billions are poured into providing well-paid jobs for teachers and lecturers, end student tuition fees and extend higher education to all those who wish to pursue it.

Click on the link to find out more about the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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