

# Dundee University crisis deepens as lecturer's strike ends, Edinburgh University announces massive cuts

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Dundee University management announced this week that there could be as many as 632 job losses—around one fifth of the university's entire work force—in response to a financial deficit of up to £35 million. Some 197 academic and 435 professional services staff positions are threatened.

In a letter dated March 31, Interim Principal Professor Shane O'Neill warned that the university would be massively reorganised, with eight academic schools merged into three faculties and a 20 percent reduction in teaching modules. Research will be rationalised. £17 million worth of cuts have already been made. Some £49 million annually will be saved by the job cuts.

O'Neill told the *Dundee Courier* of three scenarios involving either the massive job losses proposed, break up or merger with another university, or closure. O'Neill complained of a 22 percent cut in real terms state funding to Scotland-based students since 2013-14. This has forced universities to rely on international students and risky financial adventures.

The university is threatened with insolvency and would have run out of money by June without a £22 million bail out from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). An "external" investigation has been launched with support from the SFC into the financial crisis.

Most of the university's senior management have resigned over the last few months. These include Peter Fotheringham, the director of finance; Principal Iain Gillespie; also Universities Scotland's convenor and international vice-principal Wendy Alexander. Alexander is a former leader of the Scottish Labour Party and was paid around £200,000 annually to attract students from around the world to Dundee. She is now Baroness Alexander of Clevedon.

The announcement confirming job losses came towards

the end of a well-supported three week strike by lecturers in response to earlier threats of redundancies. The University and College Union (UCU) leadership—whose 450 members voted by 74 percent for strike action—is merely demanding that any redundancies are voluntary and that the union apparatus is consulted in all aspects of the reorganisation.

On April 1, UCU leader UCU general secretary Jo Grady responded to O'Neill's warning with a statement that the dispute could be over if only the job losses are packaged as being "voluntary". "University senior managers need to listen to what staff are telling them, rule out compulsory redundancies and engage with the union to find a better way forward that avoids irreparable damage before it is too late," she said.

The fact that management felt able to confirm redundancies when a strike was still ongoing reflects their confidence in the UCU functioning as a means to let off steam.

A March 26 interview on the pseudo-left RS21 website with Melissa D'Ascenzio, co-chair of the Dundee UCU branch, brought this out.

The RS21 introduction suggested that the strike "has started to turn the tide." D'Ascenzio's comments made clear this was not the case at all. She noted that the real number of jobs threatened should include 237 currently unfilled posts. Counting these took the job losses up to 869 full-time equivalent positions. D'Ascenzio's primary complaint was "they didn't even follow their own redundancy avoidance policy ... they just jumped to compulsory redundancy."

D'Ascenzio sought to pin blame for the crisis primarily on Dundee's own management, rather than the Scottish National Party government and the funding models imposed by successive Labour, Tory and Liberal

Democrat governments on the entire university system in Britain. Dundee's crisis, the over-reliance on international students and the highly dubious investments undertaken by the university, are merely one of the sharpest expressions of the problems faced by every university responding to government policy.

D'Ascenzio repeatedly claimed the UCU had "changed the narrative" and that "We've already won in a way" when all that appears to have changed is that the Scottish government has baulked at a much loved university collapsing into immediate insolvency. One consequence of the bailout from the SFC is that the university will be able to afford payments due to staff bullied and hounded into the "voluntary" redundancy, which the UCU considers acceptable.

Unison plays a similar role. Having delayed a strike ballot among non-academic staff until the lecturers were already on strike, Unison announced a 71 percent majority of among cleaners, security, IT and facilities workers for strike action. No action was called, however.

Instead, Unison, the UCU and Unite called a Town Hall meeting to push their "demands", all directed towards securing the union bureaucracies' relations with management. Around 1,000 people attended the meeting, in person and online, testifying to the tremendous concern and frustration among academics, staff and students. Immediately after the meeting, a group of 20 staff members were ejected by university security for seeking to question the University Executive Group over finances.

Simultaneously, the University of Edinburgh has announced measures likely to lead to hundreds of job losses. An all-staff email from Principal Sir Peter Mathieson, February 25, announced plans to cut around £140 million in expenditure over the next 18 months—equivalent to 10 percent of annual income in 2023-24. Mathieson's email followed a warning two weeks previously of "restructuring, possible closures of programmes or even Schools, mergers or shared services between Schools, centralisation of some services, outsourcing of others: nothing is off the table."

The planned cut will force a "smaller staff base", meaning significant reductions in both academic and administrative personnel. Fewer lecturers and support staff will lead to cancelled or merged courses.

Edinburgh's Senior Management Team (SMT) claims that external pressures—flat government funding for home undergraduates, rising utilities costs driven by post-COVID supply-chain issues and war-related price hikes, along with a decline in international student

numbers—have created a "financial gap" demanding a 10 percent cut in expenditure. Yet, according to the UCU, in 2023-24, the university recorded a net surplus of £25 million and an operating *surplus* of £86 million—5.8 percent of its income. The institution holds as much as £3.1 billion in total assets. Between 2018 and 2023, the university accumulated as much as £623 million.

While management points to external pressures, as in Dundee, the immediate strain on the university stems from its unchecked capital expenditure. Edinburgh's aggressive investment in new building projects has driven maintenance costs from £60 million in 2019 to £91 million annually in 2023-24. These capital projects are not aimed at improving educational infrastructure but at expanding revenue streams. In response, the SMT is targeting staff costs—the largest budget component—to free up resources and secure profitability.

The trade unions in Edinburgh are seeking to contain and isolate any struggle. A "consultative" ballot of UCU members found that 75 percent of academics were willing to strike. Faced with this, the UCU, Unison and Unite have written to the Scottish parliament merely to demand that Mathieson be required to give evidence to the Scottish parliament.

Students, staff and academics at Dundee, Edinburgh and every other threatened university throughout Britain—with well over 10,000 jobs immediately under threat—are urgently posed with taking control of their struggle out of the hands of the leadership of the UCU, Unison and Unite. A fight in defence of students, lecturers and staff can only be taken forward by forming rank-and-file workers and student committees independent of the trade union leaderships and committed to mobilising the broadest layers of the working class in defence of higher education.



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