

University of Sheffield staff strike against hundreds of job losses

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Staff at the University of Sheffield are taking 10 days of strike action in opposition to management's plan for mass redundancies.

The strikes began with one day of action on April 30 to be followed by a nine-day walkout May 6-16. Action short of strike began from May 1 until further notice.

The University and College Union (UCU) called the action after management rejected a plea to avoid compulsory redundancies. The university intends to drastically cut staffing costs by £23 million over the next two years. In November 2024, Sheffield Vice Chancellor (VC) Professor Koen Lamberts announced a £50 million budgetary shortfall and instigated plans to cut £9 million in staffing costs in 2025 and a further £14 million in 2026. An email, seen by the *Sheffield Tab* website, said the university is aiming to “regain a financial surplus by 2026-27.”

Sheffield University has launched a “New Schools” proposal more than halving the number of academic departments from 45 to 21 and restructuring Professional Services. The restructuring involves seven academic departments targeted for cuts, including several engineering departments, the Management School, the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, the School of East Asian Studies, the Journalism School, and the School of Mathematical and Physical Sciences. Restructuring is also being conducted at Postgraduate Research, Employability, Digital Learning, and Faculty Finance and an additional review is underway to consider the future of IT Services.

Management claim there are no plans to shut down departments or courses but such claims have zero credibility following the recent shutting of their world renowned Archaeology department.

According to the UCU, the proposals affect 796 staff but up to 1,000 jobs are at risk overall in the restructuring plan. At least 50 compulsory redundancies are threatened

during the current academic year. In addition, the university's English language teaching centre (ELTC) has placed 109 staff at risk of redundancy, according to the UCU.

A Voluntary Severance Scheme (VSS) was enforced in 2024 which saw more than 300 members of staff at Sheffield accept redundancy terms. Severance packages include only a minimum of three months' worth of salary—with an extra month of pay for each year of service beyond three years—up to a maximum of nine months of compensation.

The readiness by such numbers to accept redundancy was an indication that they saw no fight coming from the UCU leadership to save jobs.

With the demand for more redundancies it is clear the VSS alone is not be enough to reach the university's immediate £23 million labour costs cut target.

The Sheffield UCU branch have pointed to the university's £500 million financial reserves to dissuade management from compulsory redundancies. But the cuts at Sheffield and across the HE sector are integral to a plan to restructure the whole HE sector to remain competitive in the university “market”.

According to *THE (Times Higher Education)* 10,300 jobs were lost across HE during the 2023/2024 academic year, “up from 7,300 the year before, and an average of 100 per institution.” About 90 UK universities are currently restructuring alongside compulsory and voluntary redundancy schemes to lower their wage bills.

The offensive by the employers was prepared by the UCU's sellout of several national strikes over pay, conditions, jobs and pensions going back almost a decade, culminating in the strike wave of 2022/23—during which 50,000 HE workers fought attacks on pay, jobs conditions and pensions.

The UCU is not opposed to redundancies, provided they are sold as “voluntarily”. Sheffield management has

therefore said it would not carry through compulsory redundancies unless “absolutely necessary.”

The basis exists for a collective struggle against the job cuts and restructuring at universities, but the UCU is working to keep a mounting number of local HE disputes isolated from one another to avoid any confrontation with their Labour “partners” in government. No attempt is being made to unify the now near 100 separate struggles of HE university workers across the country.

UCU members at the University of Sheffield International College recently faced mass compulsory redundancies and their counterparts at Sheffield Hallam University—the other main university in the city—recently struck for two days over unpaid wages. But each dispute, within the same city, is kept isolated by the union bureaucracy and can only lead to defeat.

Speaking about the Sheffield cuts, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady, a former senior lecturer in Employment Relations at the University of Sheffield, complained, “These cuts are too deep, too fast, and put vital student support and academic provision at risk.” She demanded “management must now step back from the brink, halt compulsory redundancies and enter serious negotiations with us to find a better way forward.” In other words, come to the table with the UCU and we will agree the necessary job losses and restructuring.

The UCU’s betrayals have already led to tens of thousands of job losses in the last 15 years and many thousands more are now being axed by management. Just in the last week there are another two examples of the UCU’s voluntary redundancy operation brought to fruition.

On May 1, the UCU at Cardiff University called off a scheduled eight strike days at the last minute after an agreement was reached that no compulsory redundancies would be made during the current academic year. A Cardiff UCU spokesperson said “We truly welcome the new partnership led approach the University has committed to, and we look forward to working much more closely together than we’ve been able to so far.”

Once again the immediate dispute was settled though voluntary cuts. The BBC reported, “The university has said it was able to suspend compulsory redundancies for this calendar year ‘because of the number of applications for voluntary redundancy currently received’. Last month it updated the number of proposed job losses from 400 to 286, taking into account staff who had opted to leave voluntarily.”

The UCU spokesperson called this a “big victory”, even

though 1,000 jobs still hang in the balance. More job losses are not ruled out as the deal does not exclude losses beyond 2025. Moreover, a consultation over proposed cuts in some departments is ongoing with details finalised in June.

Last week the University of Dundee announced it was no longer forcing through over 600 compulsory job losses. Instead, with the tacit agreement of the UCU, it would go for 300 jobs voluntary losses. Carlo Morelli, an academic at the university, leading figure in the UCU bureaucracy and member of the Socialist Workers Party said of the deal to *Socialist Worker*, “It’s brilliant news. This is a massive climbdown from the university.”

The UCU are organising a national demonstration in London for May 10, “Protect Education Now”. But this proposes no fight, only declaring that “We are building the biggest coalition ever to fight for change in our sector.” This followed the UCU’s lobby of parliament held in March which claimed that workers should spend their time pressuring a right-wing Labour government hellbent on cuts throughout the public sector. Coming at the very tail end of the academic year, the demonstration is designed to encourage workers to let off steam.

If education and all the gains won by the working class are to be defended, this must be in a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour government. Taking the struggle out of the hands of the UCU bureaucracy means the formation of rank-and-file committees by workers. We urge higher education workers to get in contact with us today.



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