

UK higher education strikes against job losses, as UCU demobilises unified fight

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17 June 2025

Strikes against job losses are continuing at several UK higher education (HE) institutions. The disputes reflect the determination by education workers to oppose the devastation of HE, but they have been limited by the trade unions who are opposed to a coordinated fightback throughout the sector.

More than 10,000 jobs are threatened at half the HE institutions nationwide. No national strike ballot has been launched by the UCU, with only a lobby of Parliament, a token national protest in London, and a demonstration in Newcastle organised this term by the University and College Union leadership (UCU).

At Newcastle University, (UCU) members are continuing their second tranche of strike action this year. Early in 2024, Newcastle announced a voluntary severance scheme across all faculties. It did not specify numbers or targets. In September 2024, vice-chancellor Professor Chris Day emailed staff anticipating a £35 million shortfall over the coming academic year following changes to student visa regulations in January 2024. The Home Office reported that student visa applications for January to August 2024 were 17 percent lower than for the same period in 2023.

Day said the university had already budgeted for £15 million of "mitigations" but must now make up an additional £20 million. His "cost-control measures" meant a hiring freeze for all new and replacement "core funded" posts until further notice, freezing of current contracts, and revision of the implementation date of the national pay award, academic promotions and annual pay reviews.

While reviewing expenditure on capital projects, including buildings or equipment, the university also restricted travel inside and outside the UK unless it could be funded externally or was deemed essential to business. This is a direct attack on academic research culture, preventing participation in research conferences.

The university opened a second voluntary severance scheme aimed at academics but refused to rule out compulsory redundancies. Promotion processes were suspended for 2024, with no indication they would resume in 2025. This January, the university announced it was looking to make 300 full-time equivalent redundancies.

UCU members voted overwhelmingly for action. A 64.29

percent turnout returned an 82.76 percent vote for strike action and an 88.37 percent vote for action short of a strike (ASOS). Indefinite continuous ASOS began March 4, with an initial round of short stoppages starting at the same time.

These stepped up through March, from initial one-day actions culminating in a five-day stoppage. A second tranche of actions began with a one-day strike on April 28, moving into regular five-day strikes throughout March. These are due to continue until July 17.

Newcastle brings home the implications of the sabotage of the UCU bureaucracy of a unified struggle. Neighbouring Northumbria University announced in February 2024 the slashing of its staffing budget by £12.5 million, blaming falling international student recruitment and rising energy costs.

UCU members were balloted for strike action but launched a petition opposing compulsory redundancies. In March 2024, Northumbria announced there would be no compulsory redundancies of academic staff. Vice-chancellor Professor Andy Long said £7.5 million of the cuts were targeted at academic staff, and £6 million had already been secured through voluntary severance, elimination of vacant posts and contract reductions. Some departments were subject to a "pause" in replacement of staff leaving.

While ruling out compulsory redundancies for academic staff on the based on increased workloads and deteriorating conditions, Long did not rule out compulsory redundancies among non-academic staff, where £5 million cuts were still sought. The university said it was "confident" it could avoid this, as "we continue to work constructively with UNISON to address cost challenges positively."

While making formal noises about opposing compulsory redundancies for all staff, the UCU duly recommended calling off industrial action.

Northumbria began restructuring, with Long saying in October this would involve "no planned programme closures or redundancies." A month later, the university axed its business-and-language courses.

For the new universities, their very existence is under threat. Staff are taking four days of strike action at Bournemouth University this week against plans to cut 116 academic jobs by the end of July. Law lecturer Joe McMullen told local press that

the cuts to research departments would leave the institution a university in name only. “I would be surprised if Bournemouth University is still a university in the next five years,” he said.

The UCU warns that the cuts will see 15 courses closed permanently, with a wider loss of more than 200 jobs including professional services workers. Bournemouth UCU members voted 75 percent for strike action, and 91 percent for ASOS. Given that the UCU record in allowing masses of jobs to be lost in the sector over the last 15 years, many staff are taking voluntary redundancy with 90 staff members at Bournemouth taking this course.

A year after closing its Shrewsbury campus, Chester University has opened another voluntary severance scheme. The WSWS has been told that Chester management is planning “targeted voluntary redundancies.”

UCU members at one of the oldest universities, Durham, began three days of strikes on June 13, 14 and 19, when some exam board meetings are scheduled.

The university ran a voluntary severance scheme between November 2023 and February 2024. Failing to meet the required take-up, they reopened it in October 2024. Announcing a £20 million budget deficit, the university called on staff to take voluntary redundancy to avoid imposition of compulsory redundancies. In January this year, Durham announced its aim of saving £15 million by axing 200 non-academic posts and opened another voluntary scheme.

UCU members voted overwhelmingly for strike action, but the union framed this as a demand only for withdrawing compulsory redundancies from the table. The strike mandate, which saw a five-day stoppage at the end of April, is valid until the end of September, but UCU negotiators offered to recommend pausing further strike action if the university would guarantee no compulsory redundancies until the end of the calendar year. The university refused.

Voluntary redundancies accelerate the erosion of conditions and become a mechanism for allowing cuts to take place, but UCU General Secretary Jo Grady reiterated the union leadership’s role as an arm of management declaring, “Staff [with no opposition from the union] have already made huge sacrifices to deliver the vast majority of savings through voluntary means,” and the remaining “small gap... could easily be managed without threatening jobs.”

Two days before the current strike began, it was reported that the university had reached its £15 million target by “further clarification of the vacancies figure” and completion of all voluntary severance applications. But this UCU betrayal only sets the stage for more cuts. Over the 2025/26 academic year, the university aims to cut £10 million in non-staff costs, including faculty and professional services. No statement has been made on budgets for the next academic year, which are now under discussion.

That these are not issues specific to newer institutions can be seen in the situation at the University of Edinburgh, founded in

1583.

In November 2024, principal and vice-chancellor Sir Peter Mathieson declared the university was struggling to cover its £120 million monthly running costs. Mathieson, whose annual salary rose by nearly £20,000 to more than £400,000 earlier in 2024, blamed a fall in student numbers and the government’s rise in employers National Insurance contributions. He cautioned that compulsory redundancies would be “unavoidable” if the numbers were not met through voluntary severance.

In January, the voluntary severance scheme was opened. At the end of February, Edinburgh declared it must cut £140 million—10 percent of its annual turnover. These cuts would come from the education portfolio.

Again, the strike vote was decisive with a turnout of 60 percent and 93 percent supporting ASOS, and 84 percent supported striking.

The UCU’s response hinged solely on the “unacceptable” use of compulsory redundancies. Sophia Woodman, UCU branch president, said the university, which holds reserves estimated at £3 billion, “can easily afford to rule out sacking staff.” Insisting that the union was available for talks, she called on Edinburgh to “rule out compulsory redundancies and end this unnecessary dispute.”

UCU members are set to strike June 20 and then on September 8-12.

The unions, with the UCU leading the way, have a long record of abject betrayals over pay, conditions and pensions that have isolated staff between institutions and crippled their fight.

At Dundee University earlier this year management was able to confirm redundancies even during a strike, with the union ending it on the basis of around 300 voluntary job losses to come.

Students, staff and academics at every threatened university face the urgent challenge of taking control of their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. A fight can only be taken forward by forming rank-and-file workers and students committees, independent of the unions and committed to mobilising the broadest layers of the working class in defence of higher education.



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