

Struggle against job losses at universities in Sheffield threatened by UCU/management collusion

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17 December 2025

University and College Union (UCU) members at the University of Sheffield (UoS) completed a fourth and final week of 16 strike days over up to 20 compulsory redundancies, increased workloads, and cost-cutting measures, with a rally on December 12.

Union reps hailed the fact that the dispute is now in the hands of the arbitration service ACAS, with management accepting the move. Union negotiators met with ACAS on December 18.

In November, after the first eight days of strike action at UoS, the UCU offered to call off remaining strikes in December if the university saved a “small number” of jobs. Management, smelling blood, refused. The UCU declared, in the words of regional organiser Julie Kelley, that it was making only “modest demands”—a few less job losses than management were originally seeking.

Management gave their response on November 28 when striking UCU members received a threatening email. Strikers told the BBC that the letter, signed by head of human resources Ian Wright, effectively told them to “work for free to undermine the strike”.

The letter states, “The University’s position is that all learning lost due to industrial action must be replaced and that a failure to do so constitutes a breach of contract”. Because the workers are in breach of contract, not paying them was “in line with our long-established policy,” UoS management claims.

The UCU members forfeited 16 pay days in November and December while taking action. But the UoS now threatens that a further two weeks of pay in January will also be withheld. Management have upped the ante again by announcing a de facto “lockout”.

The only “concession” offered was a commitment to

no compulsory redundancies from the end of 2025 until March 30, 2026—just a few months away.

Kelley said the plan was “intimidating” and a “brutal” way to treat staff, and that the UoS “should be ashamed.”

Commenting on thousands of job losses across HE, including in Sheffield, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady said on October 10, “Overpaid vice-chancellors are carrying out brutal cuts and have caused an existential moment for the UK higher education sector... Staff cannot be made to pay the price for management failures.”

All such attempts to shame vice chancellors fall on deaf ears. UoS Vice Chancellor Koen Lamberts earns an annual salary exceeding £400,000, equivalent to nine full time HE lecturers. This is a salary double the threshold required to qualify for the UKs top 1 percent of income earners.

Any notion that a university which just a few years ago closed down its renowned Archaeology department—and is currently laying waste to departments and courses—will suddenly retract its cost-cutting must be rejected.

UCU members at the city’s other HE institution—Sheffield Hallam University (SHU)—did not join UoS workers on strike in the week beginning December 1, as planned strike action was suspended by the union on November 26 so as not to “disrupt” negotiations with management. The university is seeking a further 80 redundancies, despite cutting around 670 jobs during 2024 through to May 2025.

During previous strikes SHU workers told WSWs reporters on picket lines there had been zero movement from management since negotiations began months

earlier.

Grady said at the outset of the dispute in Sheffield on October 30, “There is no justification for compulsory redundancies at the University of Sheffield or Sheffield Hallam, especially when there are other options available.” The main “other option” which the union specializes in is negotiating away jobs by drawing up a voluntary severance scheme with the employers.

Grady added, “If the employers do not see sense and reverse the job cuts, they can expect to see disruption across the city in November and December.” But there has been no united offensive, with the bureaucracy keeping the two Sheffield HE disputes separate from one another.

Each university workforce, except for one joint rally weeks ago, was kept separate despite the campuses just a short walk across the city centre. There was no joint strike, no joint demands or demonstrations nor appeals for support and unity with Further Education workers—who have recently voted for strike action—teachers or other educators.

Simultaneous strike dates only occurred for four days in four weeks of planned action because of the staggered nature of the stoppages and the premature halting of strikes at SHU. This atomisation of HE workers’ struggles within a single city is an acute expression of the union’s policy of isolating a series of local recent strikes over job losses, and other issues, including many dozens of course closures, at universities in Edinburgh, Nottingham, Cardiff, Bradford, Leicester and Dundee—all which face defeat.

Due to the UNC’s collusion, more than 12,000 academic HE jobs have been eliminated in the past two years with 3,000 more under immediate threat. Plans by universities to meet current funding gaps—consisting of hundreds of millions pounds—by eliminating jobs also threaten 20,000 jobs in support roles including ICT, administration, student services, library and maintenance workers.

To maintain control of struggles breaking out at many universities against the jobs cull, the UCU held a ballot for national strike action. The ballot closed November 28, failing to secure a mandate for strike action over pay and jobs after years of betrayals, including the UCU’s sellout of several previous national strikes. While those who participated voted 70 percent in favour of strike action, and 83 percent backed taking

other forms of industrial action short of strikes, only 39 percent of the UCU membership voted—considerably short of the 50 percent turnout mandated by law to permit a strike. The Educational Institute of Scotland also failed to reach the threshold.

The turnout marks a second successive failure of a UCU national ballot after only 42.6 percent of the membership voted last year.

The central issue is drawing the lessons of these previous defeats. A fightback can only be successful if it is organised independently of the UCU bureaucracy by establishing rank-and-file committees uniting academic and non-academic workers with students to defend jobs and pay in opposition to the devastating marketisation of HE backed by Keir Starmer’s Labour government.



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