

University of Sheffield lock-out of staff adhering to action short of striking

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Management at the University of Sheffield (UoS) implemented a lock-out on January 19, the first in the history of UK higher education (HE). Such measures have been threatened before by UK universities but had never previously been carried through.

UoS management is refusing to pay staff who fail to reschedule teaching missed during 16 days of strike action in November and December 2025. It is demanding that teaching lost due to industrial action be rescheduled without additional pay. Workers who had their wages deducted while on strike are now facing further pay losses for refusing to carry out unpaid work they were not compensated for in the first place.

Staff are therefore confronted with an effective “double deduction.” University and College Union (UCU) members already forfeited 16 days’ pay during the strike and are now expected to provide unpaid teaching. This threat is being enforced through the university’s refusal to pay any salary until workers accept the double deduction.

Management claims that, following the return to work in December, it is entitled to issue a “reasonable instruction” to reschedule missed teaching. UoS does not recognise this as additional work and cynically argues that lost learning must be replaced in order to meet its obligations to students.

While technically legal, this move is regarded as a highly controversial manoeuvre under UK employment law: the refusal to accept and pay for what management defines as “partial performance” by withholding all wages.

In November 2024, Vice-Chancellor Koen Lamberts announced a £50 million budget shortfall at UoS, which he intended to address through sweeping attacks on the workforce. He declared plans to cut £23 million by slashing staffing and costs over the following two

years. The “New Schools” restructuring proposal reduces academic departments from 45 to 21, affecting nearly 800 staff. Between 300 and 600 workers are believed to have taken voluntary redundancy over the past 14 months. Management has refused to extend its no-compulsory-redundancy pledge beyond March 2025.

On November 28, 2025, striking UCU members received an intimidating email signed by Head of Human Resources Ian Wright, threatening a lock-out. The letter stated that all learning lost due to industrial action must be replaced and that failure to comply would constitute a breach of contract, warranting pay deductions of up to 100 percent. Strikers told the BBC that the letter amounted to a demand that they “work for free to undermine the strike.”

The UCU leadership described the threat as “brutal” and “intimidating,” arguing it was an attempt to force staff into unpaid labour and prevent the exercise of their legal right to strike. The UCU branch at University College London donated £5,000 in solidarity funds, warning that if Sheffield management succeeded in “breaking the resolve of union members, other employers are liable to follow suit.” However, the union bureaucracy organised nothing of substance in response.

In the new year, the university wrote to staff informing them that any academic who had not rescheduled lost teaching would have their entire pay docked for three weeks from January 19, on top of wages already lost during the strike. Workers who participated in the strike and refused to reschedule teaching therefore face losing a total of 31 days’ pay—around 8 percent of their annual salary.

Management carried out its threat on January 19. Staff who had not submitted “satisfactory plans” to

reschedule missed classes are having their entire salary withheld until February 6, 2026, and potentially beyond. During this period, any work performed is classified as “voluntary.”

David Hayes, chair of the Sheffield UCU branch, described the move as “disproportionate and punitive,” stating: “It is extremely unclear to me why this is allowed to happen. They’ve already deprived us of the money that we would have got for teaching this material anyway during the strike action... It’s just bullying tactics from a university that doesn’t have a better answer to the dispute that we’re in.”

After management made its initial threats last year, Hayes had stated that action short of strike (ASOS) was protected by law. He now says he is “perplexed” by the vicious response of management.

The union has had eight weeks since the initial threatening letter demanding that UCU members work for free, yet it has organised nothing. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady stated: “For management to now threaten staff with withholding pay, on top of the pay lost for lawful industrial action, is nothing short of scandalous... Sheffield management should get back round the table and work with us to save jobs.”

Appealing for management to return to negotiations while it ruthlessly presses home its advantage amounts to the UCU running up the white flag. The union’s sole aim is to suppress the key political issues and confine workers’ struggles within acceptable limits that threaten neither university management nor the Labour government.

This has given UoS management a free hand during five rounds of negotiations, all of which have been rejected in workforce ballots. Hayes noted: “Each offer had been less beneficial, less desirable... Just saying ‘We’ll make you redundant, but we’ll give you a sort of stay of execution until May or September or October.’”

Management pays lip service to the right to strike but insists that staff “not fulfilling their contractual duties... will not be paid for the days they do not work, as is standard practice in any sector.”

Management teams at universities across the country are closely watching developments. The struggle at UoS represents the thin end of the wedge, yet at every stage the union has sought conciliation. A fightback at Sheffield and nationally across HE can succeed only if

it is organised independently of the UCU bureaucracy. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees uniting academic and non-academic workers with students to defend jobs and pay against the destructive marketisation of higher education.



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