UCU members to strike again at the University of Sheffield International College

Our reporters
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Teaching and administrative staff at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC) have voted to strike over management's refusal to offer any pay rise for the following year. This represents a pay cut, with inflation currently measured by the RPI at 4.2 percent.

Workers are set to strike for five alternate days on February 16, 18, 20, 24 and 26.

USIC is owned by Study Group and operates in partnership the University of Sheffield (UoS), using the UoS prefix and their coat of arms to attract international students to study preparation courses to progress and study at UoS. Courses at USIC can cost students up to £26,000 per year.

A strike ballot by members of the University and College Union (UCU) concluded in December 2025 with 90 percent of UCU members backing strike action and 100 percent backing "action short of a strike" (ASOS).

The workforce demanded a 12 percent salary increase to keep pace with inflation, match industry standards and to make up for previous years' effective pay cuts. Staff have seen real-terms pay cuts over the last 3–5 years when RPI inflation peaked beyond 13 percent.

The USIC workforce also want the formal inclusion of assessment grading into their workload model, rather than the present model whereby management treats it as unpaid work staff must complete to fulfil their contracts. Other demands are for the provision of five days paid carers leave in a twelve-month period and an additional five days of paid annual leave per annum.

Management refused to enter into negotiations until February 17, the day after the strike is to begin, in an attempt to push the union to suspend action. Previously last minute stalling tactics have been rewarded by the union suspending strikes on the flimsiest of concessions or by management returning to their original negotiating stance after threatening to withdraw it.

The employer learned enough about the UCU leadership when USIC workers embarked upon the first ever strike at a private UK college, also then demanding a 12 percent pay increase. Workers walked out initially in November 2022 and again January 2023 when the dispute remained unresolved. The union then retreated to a "reasonable and achievable" 9 percent demand, substantially below RPI inflation. Finally, the UCU offered Study Group 8 percent in 2023 and 2 percent in 2024, effectively a 6 percent pay cut in 2022 and another cut in 2024.

Staff voted for a further 10 days of strike action in early 2025 in response to compulsory redundancies. However, the UCU suspended the strike after management replaced the threat of compulsory job losses with low-value voluntary severance packages and a series of redeployments within Study Group that put existing roles and workloads at risk.

Emboldened, this year Study Group they have cut straight to the chase in seeking to impose cuts. In the past USIC management made a derisory offer then waited while the union lowered workers expectations and demands and returned with reduced demands.

Study Group cries poverty over "short-term financial gaps" and blames rising staff costs, but they are notorious low payers. At their non-unionised colleges hourly wages for part-timers can be as low for doctorate holders as £25 per class hour, with an hour's preparation expected before student face time. Effectively halving such low hourly rates sends them beneath the hourly minimum wage.

Study Group and UoS blame falling international student numbers, but this is a situation of their own making. Over a decade and a half both UoS and USIC became overtly dependent upon the recruitment of Chinese students whose numbers fell off a cliff edge when UoS—after an uninterrupted five year decline in ranking—fell outside the world top 100 universities. No other British university/international college has suffered such a precipitous fall in international student numbers

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over recent years.

Study Group is a global provider of private education, typically generating annual revenues numbering hundreds of millions. In the UK, their university connected colleges have historically provided high profits. In their most recent detailed accounts filed in late 2025, Study Group UK Limited reported an operating profit of approximately £25-30 million. Historically, Study Group has maintained high profit margins in the UK, frequently exceeding 15-20 percent.

However, while the UK arm remains profitable the global parent company SG Global Topco Limited presents a less buoyant bottom line due to "exceptional items", mainly debt servicing. Owned by private equity firm Ardian, together with more recent reports of involvement from Bain Capital Credit, Study Group carries significant debt. In previous years, even when making large operating profits they reported pre-tax losses sometimes of £30 million or more, after interest payments on the loans spent buying Study Group

Study Group continues to expand and their highest-paid directors receive salary, bonuses, and benefits totalling £250,000-350,000. This is equal to the pay of approximately 10-14 full-time lecturers.

The latest dispute at USIC comes only weeks after the UCU suspended a strike at the Sheffield College at the last minute after accepting a shoddy pay offer. It coincides with a UoS lockout of staff and another unresolved dispute over redundancies at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU). UoS imposed the lockout against workers who refused to reschedule classes missed during a strike late last year and work for free. They are withholding all wages from such staff under the rubric of "failing to fulfil their contracts"

Education workers' struggles are confronted by a union bureaucracy that repeatedly isolates, demobilises and betrays them. As on previous occasions there are no calls for unified or solidarity action throughout the Higher Education, Further Education or private sector. There are no attempts to unify struggles with other UCU members in struggle at UoS (even though USIC is an appendage of the university), nor with workers at SHU who remain in an unresolved dispute with management, or with those at the Sheffield College.

The UCU disaggregates both national and city-wide disputes, suspending or calling off coordinated action when employers offer token deals; converting successful strike mandates into brief, intermittent or symbolic stoppages while pleading for management to act reasonably and return to negotiations. Enabling voluntary redundancies at both UoS and USIC, the union is the conduit through which jobs are destroyed not defended.

Private education providers are hyper profit driven by financialisation and increasingly universities are run as profit-seeking enterprises. Therefore, closing academic departments and courses, redundancy schemes and attacks on staff pay are methods by which to maintain margins. There is a renewed emphasis on market driven priorities include for instance at the UoS in research aligned to the growing arms industry and at SHU's grandiose London property projects, while shifting costs onto staff and students.

The UCU bureaucracy functions as a mediator that legitimises marketisation by limiting confrontation and ensuring that workers are not allowed to do anything that might disturb corporate?union relations. At the time of the USIC ballot result last year, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady said: "Our demands are not unreasonable, and the hard-working staff employed by USIC deserve better. Instead of pushing their own workforce towards taking industrial action, management needs to work with us to resolve this dispute."

Any successful defence of jobs, pay and Higher Education cannot be "reasonable" in the eyes of bosses concerned only with revenue and profit targets. To wage a successful fight means mobilising independently from the trade union bureaucracy. Workers at USIC must form rank?and?file committees at every HE, FE and educational workplace, involving academic and non?academic staff, and students together, to coordinate demands and democratically plan action.

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