

Staff at Sheffield Hallam University balloting again to strike over job losses and attack on pensions

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Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) are being balloted for industrial action after the university executive board put forward proposals for cuts of almost £27 million.

These include £16 million of savings from 200 academic job losses, £8 million in reduced contributions to staff pensions, ending nationally agreed pay progression, and other savings carved off the backs of the workforce.

The ballot begins on March 31 and closes on May 5.

It comes just months after UCU members walked out over job losses, increased workloads, and staff welfare, and follows the redundancies of approximately 1,000 workers at the university as cuts of £60 million were made over the last two years.

On March 10, at a full-staff video call briefing with the neutral heading “March all staff event,” SHU workers were told exactly how the university intended to cut £26.6 million from their 2026-27 budget, and about staff changes to pensions. The next day, *Times Higher Education* (*THE*) revealed that SHU plans to shift both research-active and non-research-active lecturers into a subsidiary firm, leaving research-intensive staff as the only academics employed directly by the institution.

Adding insult to injury, the weekly and annual teaching hours of teaching staff are to be increased, and automatic progression between grades replaced by a subjective “promotion-only” management model.

The proposals would greatly reduce the cost of SHU’s contribution to the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS), which stipulates an employer contribution rate of 28.68 percent. Teaching staff are to be placed in the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) instead, which has a lower employer contribution rate of 17.6 percent.

Research-focused staff will remain employed by the

university, but they too will be moved onto the less generous LGPS pension terms. Only staff eligible for the Research Excellence Framework will remain employees of the university and retain their TPS pension.

Lecturers, and those who conduct research but whose work does not attract sufficient private sector investment, will lose tens of thousands of pounds in deferred earnings.

Ruth Beresford, a SHU UCU branch member, told *THE* that SHU’s announcement was an “assault on working conditions” and had caused “anger, fear [and] confusion” among staff. Beresford said the proposals would create “three levels of academic staff” and “dismantle” and “fragment” current academic structures. Shifting teaching-focused staff into a subsidiary firm denies them any research opportunities.

“This is actually a fundamental attack really on what it is to be an academic, and what it means to do academia and to be a university. By dividing us between research and teaching, it makes transitions between the two almost impossible,” Beresford continued.

In January, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) highlighted the increasing use of subsidiary firms at post-1992 universities like SHU to avoid staff receiving the Teachers’ Pension Scheme. Post-92 universities (former polytechnics) are generally required to offer staff the TPS, which involves an employer contribution rate of 28.68 percent.

This is significantly higher than the 14.5 percent employer contribution to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), which is more commonly offered at leading “Russell Group” universities such as the University of Sheffield.

The UCEA claims TPS pension arrangements are “a significant contributor to the financial distress in the post-92 sector.”

SHU's protracted and deepening attack on HE workers' jobs, status, salaries, pensions, and workload expectations; the ongoing pay dispute; and the recent lock-out and enforcement of unpaid work at the University of Sheffield (UoS) take place amid the continuing strike at the private University of Sheffield International College (USIC) over repeated pay cuts.

USIC workers held two days of strikes this week and are set to strike again next week on Monday and Wednesday.

These are not isolated actions by "rogue" bosses at local institutions but are integral to a unified offensive by university managements, private education providers, and the Labour government against HE workers. Their ruthless approach follows the rapacious demands of the capitalist market, which is incompatible with providing a well-funded further and higher education for all and maintaining the integrity and objectivity of academic disciplines.

Higher education institutions—including Russell Group universities, redbrick universities, and post-92 former polytechnics—along with private education providers such as Study Group, which runs USIC, are implementing cuts, restructuring, and austerity measures to protect revenues and align higher education with corporate priorities.

This is reflected in shifting priorities across institutions: at USIC, the focus is on the international "student experience" rather than education; at SHU, on maximising research revenue; and at the UoS, on meeting the scientific demands of the military-industrial complex.

The UoS lock-out and the shifting of staff off TPS demonstrate management's use of unprecedented legal and financial chicanery to crush workers' conditions and resistance. Providers are pursuing revenue through financial engineering, outsourcing, fractional part-time contracts, low pay, heavy debt, and private-equity ownership. These ruthless tactics aim to establish new precedents in an overall assault on workers' pay, pensions, terms, and conditions.

Throughout the now decade-and-a-half of roiling unrest among HE workers over the prolonged assault on their jobs, wages and conditions, the UCU leadership has engineered a series of retreats, defeats, and the railroading through of repeated cuts. While the salaries of the union bureaucracy rise year-on-year—with leader Jo Grady pulling in just short of £160,000 in salary and benefits—those of UCU members are moving in the opposite direction.

Any meaningful defence of pay, pensions, jobs, and

working conditions cannot be entrusted to the UCU bureaucracy. Its refusal to coordinate strike action even across Sheffield's three ongoing HE disputes, and to link it with workers in Further Education, as well as its repeated suspension of strikes, are central to the impasse workers face, not just in that city but nationally.

UCU leaders act as mediators for management, repeatedly isolating and atomising workplace struggles, converting strike mandates into token or intermittent action that is called off on the flimsiest pretext, while bargaining away core demands and rights.

HE workers must demand the restoration of their salaries decimated over recent decades, the complete reversal of all implemented and planned pension cuts, full restoration of TPS pension rights, an immediate end to pay docking, restoration of all withheld pay, no redundancies, and an investigative inquiry into management and private-provider contracts, including an opening up of all the bosses' books.

Such demands will require the use of militant class-struggle methods, including the mass mobilisation of workers, sector-wide coordinated stoppages, and strike action placed directly under workers' control.

This fight requires transferring power away from an entrenched union apparatus back to college and university workers facing huge attacks from management.

The only way to enact such a programme of struggle in the workplace is to organise beyond the sclerotic control of the union leadership. This means setting up rank-and-file committees which can democratically elect their own delegates, publish and circulate independent bulletins exposing management and UCU collusion, organise cross-campus solidarity delegations together with students, establish hardship and strike funds overseen by workers, and prepare for coordinated, escalating strike action that brings HE to a standstill.



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