

Sheffield Hallam university staff to take strike action—Unite the city’s three higher education disputes!

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Members of the University and College Union (UCU) at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) have voted by an overwhelming 87.7 percent to strike against proposed job cuts, rising workloads, and reduced employer pension contributions.

With a turnout of nearly 73 percent—the highest recorded by the SHU branch—members have backed 18 strike days scheduled across May 27–29, June 1–5, 8–12 and 15–19.

Management plans to cut up to 200 academic and research posts, intensify workloads, and close a £26.6 million budget gap through restructuring that includes transferring lecturers into a private subsidiary and removing access to the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS). Roughly £71 million of “savings” have already been pushed through since 2024, eliminating 1,000 posts.

The fight at Sheffield Hallam is part of a wider pattern across the city’s higher education sector, with both SHU and University of Sheffield staff taking repeated strike action in recent years over pay, pensions, workloads and redundancies.

At the University of Sheffield, no new strike dates have been announced by the UCU following six days of action in May, despite a mandate running until March 2027. Management has escalated its confrontation with staff, demanding that missed teaching be rescheduled without pay and threatening to withhold 100 percent of wages from those refusing to comply.

This “lockout” strategy continues measures first deployed after strikes in December 2025. If unchallenged, such tactics will be widely adopted across the education sector. At the same time, the university is pressing ahead with its “New Schools”

restructuring plan, which will cut academic departments from 45 to 21.

Alongside these disputes, academic and support staff at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC), operated by private provider Study Group, have staged repeated walkouts in recent years. The most recent involved 12 days of strikes in March and April over pay, following a 90 percent vote against what amounted to a zero percent pay offer—another real-terms pay cut after years of wage erosion.

The UCU leadership suspended further strike action at USIC after referring the dispute to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). This mechanism has repeatedly been used by the union to dissipate industrial momentum, replacing collective action with closed-door negotiations over which members have no control. Study Group exploited the process to delay and stall, offering no meaningful concessions.

Meanwhile, Study Group itself has been absorbed by a wave of private equity consolidation. It has been acquired by Arete Education, backed by Global University Systems—owners of multiple private higher education institutions including the University of Law in the UK—and Brightstar Capital Partners.

The company’s 1,600 employees are being forced through a restructuring strategy increasingly oriented toward AI-enabled learning systems and digital platforms. Its previous owners, Bain Capital Credit and Intermediate Capital Group, only took control following a financial restructuring just a year earlier.

What is unfolding across Sheffield is a concentrated expression of a broader, 15-year assault on higher education, accelerated under the Starmer Labour

government. Labour is starving the sector of funding; per-student spending in England remains down by 20-25 percent in real terms compared with 2012. The result has been further marketisation in the scramble for funds and an estimated 30,000 job losses in the higher education sector in just the past three years.

University administrations are complicit, trying to force students to make up the shortfall by complaining, as SHU has, that tuition fees have been “frozen for a decade” at £9,250 a year. For the first time since 2017, the Starmer government has increased the tuition fee cap in England to £9,535. Meanwhile, the SHU Vice Chancellor’s total remuneration stands at £328,000 a year—based on on 2023/24 figures.

SHU has also blamed rising energy costs and inflation for its “financial challenges,” shifting the burden of economic instability caused by the US-led war against Iran onto university workers.

This is deeply cynical, given Sheffield’s universities have close ties with the arms industry. The government’s militarisation drive, in which higher education institutions are increasingly being made partners, is a driving force behind the underfunding of education and other public services.

Staff facing an unending cycle of cuts and intensifying workloads, teaching students who risk being priced out of higher education, have mounted determined resistance. But they are being undermined by the UCU leadership.

After shutting down the pensions and four fights disputes, the union has fragmented struggles over redundancies between institutions—even within the same city.

Since becoming general secretary in 2019, UCU general secretary Jo Grady has combined hollow militant rhetoric with the systematic demobilisation of struggles, including national strikes—over five years from 2018 to 2023—in higher and further education. This has intensified under the Starmer government, with no challenge mounted to the continued underfunding and marketisation of the sectors.

Speaking on the SHU dispute in March, Grady declared that staff were “rightly outraged that management wants to slash pension benefits, tear up local and national agreements and divide the workforce.” Yet it is the union apparatus itself that enforces this division, ensuring disputes remain isolated

and uncoordinated.

At SHU, planned strike action in December 2025 was suspended on November 26 by the UCU leadership, to avoid “disrupting” negotiations, despite management making no concessions. Across disputes, strikes are halted routinely based on vague “new offers,” with details withheld from the membership, while disputes are buried in ACAS arbitration—where industrial action is effectively neutralised.

Despite three simultaneous disputes unfolding within walking distance of each other in Sheffield, involving identical issues of pay, pensions, workloads and job cuts, the UCU has refused to coordinate action across the city.

Appeals to pressure the UCU leadership into mounting a coordinated fight have repeatedly proven futile. What is needed is the formation of rank-and-file committees of higher education workers across all three Sheffield disputes, uniting UCU members with all academic and support staff and organising active support among students.

Such committees would provide a forum for workers to agree common demands and red lines, independently of the union bureaucracy’s efforts to sell their jobs, wages and conditions down the river. They would then be a means for coordinating the fight for those demands across institutions, breaking the isolation imposed by the union apparatus.

This fight must inevitably extend beyond Sheffield to further and higher education workers across the country. Only through coordinated industrial action—aimed squarely at the government’s underfunding and marketisation of the sector—can the attacks on jobs, wages, pensions and conditions be defeated.



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