

# The issues in the University and College Union “global academic boycott” of the University of Sheffield

Joe Mount, Harvey Thompson  
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The University and College Union (UCU) declared a “global academic boycott” of the University of Sheffield (UoS) this month, calling on academics worldwide to refuse conferences, guest lectures, visiting positions and new external examiner contracts, while urging honorary graduates and external examiners to resign.

UCU General Secretary Jo Grady said the boycott was in response to the university’s strike-breaking operation, denouncing Vice-Chancellor Koen Lamberts of trying to force staff to “scab on their own strike” by withholding pay both during the action and after members had returned from the picket line to work. Such strikebreaking, she declared, “should have died out with the Pinkertons.”

The boycott is the latest phase of a dispute that intensified sharply in November 2024, when management announced a £50 million budget shortfall and plans to cut £23 million from the wages bill. More than 500 jobs have since been cut through “voluntary” severance. Workers in chemistry and materials science have been told that around 20 percent of faculty could be made redundant, and jobs in East Asian studies and six further schools are under review.

The trigger was management’s withholding pay, a de facto lockout without precedent in the history of UK higher education. Having already docked pay for strike days, the UoS withheld further pay from 50 staff who declined to reschedule missed teaching without compensation.

Across 2025–26, members took 22 days of strike action and were met with 42 days of pay deductions. In January, the university informed staff that academics who had not rescheduled lost teaching would have three weeks’ pay docked from January 19, on top of wages already lost during the strike—representing around 8 percent of their

annual salary.

The lockout is designed to make the exercise of the legal right to strike financially ruinous. Within months, management at Goldsmiths, University of London, and the University of Edinburgh had adopted the same mechanism against staff conducting marking boycotts, declaring all work performed in the meantime “voluntary.”

Described by the local branch leadership as “essentially the highest form of sanction” the union can impose, the academic boycott (the eighth in UCU history) responds to a real grievance but by itself cannot halt the destruction of jobs. These measures do not involve the withdrawal of labour by UCU members at Sheffield, cost management little in the short term, and depend on the voluntary compliance of a dispersed international community over which the union exercises no control.

The experience of workers at Goldsmiths contains important lessons because it is the only case where a UCU boycott has run twice against the same institution.

Goldsmiths, with a workforce of 1,850 and one of the most highly unionised UCU branches in UK higher education, became the site of three successive rounds of cuts over the five years to mid-2026. But industrial action against the cuts was repeatedly betrayed by the UCU.

Goldsmiths staff took 15 days of strike action in November and December 2021 against plans to cut 46 posts. The first academic boycott, from January to August 2022, accompanied a marking and assessment boycott (MAB). Both were lifted after management pledged no further compulsory redundancies. GUCU conceded, however, that it had been unable to defend the 17 jobs already lost in the first tranche.

In early 2024, Goldsmiths management threatened 130 compulsory redundancies, one in six academic staff,

provoking a marking boycott and 10 days of strike action. Management's refusal to retreat prompted a second "greylist" (academic boycott) that June and the announcement of an indefinite strike for September. Again, management offered a one-year pause on compulsory job losses for 2024–25. The union declared victory and stood down all three actions.

The settlement allowed management to pressure 62 staff into redundancy agreements, push 17 into inferior "overflow" roles, and—under a Voluntary Severance Scheme launched in January 2024—drive out a further 66 members despite the pause in forced job cuts. By GUCU's account, 145 staff were gone and £16.1 million in cuts extracted.

This year, an emboldened Goldsmiths management announced a £22 million cuts programme, including £20 million in staff costs, in its third assault in five years. The "Future Goldsmiths" programme, triggered by an £8 million shortfall in student recruitment income for 2025/26, threatens 269 posts, with professional services staff targeted first and academic cuts to follow from September.

GUCU members voted on April 13 to escalate to a marking and assessment boycott, which began on April 27. On May 22, Interim Vice-Chancellor David Oswell announced that 100 percent of pay would be docked from boycotting staff, even where those staff continued to perform all other duties, declaring any work performed in the meantime to be "voluntary." The UCU said this was a de facto lockout. A strike began on June 8 and continues into its third week, with no settlement reached.

In whatever combination of action the UCU took at Goldsmiths, including academic boycotts, each union-agreed settlement converted threatened compulsory redundancies into voluntary departures. This is portrayed by the UCU as a defensive victory, even as Goldsmiths proceeded with the next round of cuts.

What is ruled out by the union bureaucracy are the class struggle methods that could halt the offensive: indefinite all-out strikes, occupations, and coordinated action across every Sheffield campus and across the sector.

The conduct of the UCU apparatus throughout this dispute is the suspension of industrial action on the flimsiest pretexts, the isolation of the three Sheffield disputes (the University of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University, and the privately run Sheffield International College) from one another, and the channelling of confrontation into ACAS arbitration. This was all overseen by UCU General Secretary Jo Grady—a left

talker recently handed an £18,000 rise in annual pay, taking her salary to £127,690 plus benefits.

The UCU bureaucracy is a privileged social layer increasingly integrated into management of the marketised university system. Grady confines her criticism to appeals that "overpaid vice-chancellors" behave more reasonably, accepting the framework of creeping privatisation while pleading for a negotiated administration of the cuts required.

Successive Conservative and Labour governments have starved the university sector of funding while imposing damaging visa restrictions, creating the conditions for the present crisis.

The transformation of higher education into a market has proceeded over decades. By 2017–18, government teaching grants accounted for just 20 percent of university income, with the remaining 80 percent coming from private sources, increasing universities' dependence on tuition fees and other commercial revenue.

Tuition fees were introduced by Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1998 and tripled to £9,000 under the Tory–Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010. The Starmer government has sanctioned a rise above £10,000 for the first time in 2027–28, with automatic inflation-linked increases thereafter—making the UK one of the most expensive countries in the world in which to study.

These attacks have met determined resistance from education workers. Industrial action, including national strikes, against falling pay, job cuts, worsening conditions and pensions cuts culminated in the 2022–24 national strike wave. But the corporatist trade union bureaucracy systematically demobilised these struggles while promoting illusions in an incoming Labour government that has deepened austerity, intensified attacks on higher education, and presided over worsening social inequality amid a continuing cost-of-living crisis. An estimated 30,000 jobs have been lost in universities over the course of the last three years—the bulk of these under the Starmer government the UCU backed into office.

The defence of jobs, pay and working conditions requires new rank-and-file organisations of struggle, independent of the union apparatus and the parties of the ruling class.



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