University of Sheffield International College staff set to strike over falling wages and threatened job losses

Our reporters
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Teaching, administration and student support staff at the University of Sheffield International College (USIC) are to strike for five days from Tuesday, on November 10, 13, 16, 18 and 23.

USIC is run for profit by Study Group from a University of Sheffield building utilising the university's branding. It prepares international students for master's and bachelor's degrees at the university, with courses costing up to £26,000 a year.

USIC's University and College Union (UCU) branch voted overwhelmingly in mid-October to strike over management's refusal to offer any pay rise since September 2023.

Under the Retail Prices Index measure, prices, including mortgage interest costs and structural housing expenses, have risen by 11.5 percent since September 2023. A static £35,000 salary is effectively worth just £31,376 today, and a worker would require £39,042 to match their 2023 standard of living.

In late October, Study Group issued 14 "At risk of Redundancy" notices to USIC staff—six student experience staff, six curriculum leaders and two heads of subject. In response the UCU branch entered a formal dispute over the planned redundancies. Study Group's highest-paid directors receive up to £350,000 each in salary, bonuses and benefits, roughly the salaries of 10 to 14 full-time lecturers. Chief executive Ian Crichton took home more than £600,000 in 2024, including a bonus of over £195,000.

To cut costs further, Study Group intends to scrap its teaching hours workload agreement with staff. This aims to expand workloads without extra pay.

Study Group has never agreed to USIC workers' repeated demands to include assessment and grading in their workload model. For part-time lecturers a more exploitative model exists, as management treats grading as unpaid work that staff must complete to fulfil their contracts or risk losing further opportunities. It has emerged that Study Group is attempting to pay new part-time staff an hourly rate beneath that paid to existing staff.

Study Group changed hands again in May, when Arete Education bought it. The previous owners, Bain Capital Credit and Intermediate Capital Group, had only taken control in 2025, buying the company from the private equity firm Ardian after a financial restructuring in which Study Group secured tens of millions of pounds in funding from them.

In its most recent accounts, from late 2025, Study Group UK Limited reported an operating profit of approximately £25 million–£30 million. The global parent company, SG Global Topco Limited, reported losses, mainly due to debt servicing.

These are not operational losses. It is the interest on this debt, run up under successive private equity owners, that produces the "short-term financial gaps" cited by Study Group management as the reason for austerity at USIC. Cuts to workers' wages and jobs help pay the interest on the debt incurred to buy the business.

Arete is backed by Global University Systems, owner of multiple private higher education institutions, and Brightstar Capital Partners (BCP), a private equity firm. The two jointly own Arden University, after BCP bought a 50 percent stake in July 2025.

According to Companies House, Arden University Ltd recorded pre-tax profits of £87 million for the year ending May 2025.

The involvement of private equity in the form of BCP presages a huge shift in how Study Group operates, with enormous implications for workers' pay and livelihoods. Arete says it is investing in AI-focused technology through Arden, and Study Group says the deal will bring "AI-enabled solutions and digital innovation." This only points to a move away from physical colleges like USIC and towards online courses, educational technology and the widespread use of artificial intelligence.

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BCP demands business costs be nailed to the floor. Resisting wage demands at USIC is integral to a strategy of standardising wages downwards across all the Study Group pathway centres. USIC salaries and hourly rates could be reduced to the lower rates advertised at other Study Group centres like Leeds, where the hourly rate is a measly £33.57 at most. This rate includes one hour of preparation for every hour of teaching, and the intensive grading and writing of comments on essays, exams, presentations and other assessments, which pushes the effective hourly rate towards the poverty-level minimum wage.

To combat BCP's private equity playbook of wage and job cuts, the UCU offers only its now familiar intermittent one-day strikes, which add up in their entirety to a single working week. Such token action allows management to absorb the disruption, wait out the strike and return to its original position. This is what Study Group has done repeatedly since the first strike at USIC in 2022.

The UCU has a record at USIC of repeatedly suspending strikes on the flimsiest pretext, retreating from one negotiating position after another, leading to the imposition of pay cuts in 2022 and again in 2024. In 2025, a strike over compulsory redundancies was suspended after management merely swapped the threat for low-value voluntary severances and ill-fitting redeployments within Study Group.

The UCU is once again isolating the struggle in Sheffield from those across further and higher education, where college and university managements are cutting pay and destroying jobs by the hundreds and even thousands to meet the demands of the education "market." UCU branches at more than a dozen universities, including Nottingham, Goldsmiths, Edinburgh, Glasgow Caledonian, Sussex and Exeter, are striking, balloting or in dispute over job cuts this term. An estimated 30,000 university jobs have gone nationally in the last three years.

Last month, the union ended its years-long dispute at the University of Sheffield, calling off 17 days of strikes due to begin on October 27 after members accepted a management offer. Sheffield UCU's statement revealed that the agreement had not ended the threat of job losses: "We will continue to consult with members and offer spaces for discussion about how to continue to protect colleagues at risk of compulsory redundancy, as well as to fight the ongoing expansion of staff workload."

The UCU bureaucracy has become the conduit through which job and pay cuts are imposed, legitimising the marketisation of higher education by ensuring educators and support staff do nothing that disturbs corporate-union relations.

Announcing on November 5 the USIC strikes, UCU leader Jo Grady said, "Strike action is a last resort for our members." Grady does not call for a fight against all job losses. She asks only that management "remove the threat of compulsory redundancies and resolve the dispute, or face weeks of disruption." Such rhetoric is the language of class compromise and abject surrender. Lifting that threat would allow management and union to sit down together to slash jobs behind the fig leaf of "voluntary" redundancies as happened at USIC in 2025.

USIC workers should take stock of where four years of struggle under the UCU's leadership have left them. The value of salaries has fallen sharply while workloads have grown.

Educators and support workers must organise their own rank-and-file committee, democratically accountable to the membership, to take forward their fight. This will enable them to draw up their own demands not what is claimed "affordable" by Study Group's billionaire private equity investors. No pay award should be subsidised by job cuts; these must be withdrawn. There must be full restoration of the wages lost over the past three years, for a demand of at least 12 percent.

There must be full oversight of negotiations, with no veto on strike action by UCU officials before the membership votes and decides it meets their demands. The schedule of strike action must be determined by those conducting the fight, who must reach out to co-workers across Study Group to build solidarity action and begin a counteroffensive against restructuring beyond one campus.

Study Group operates in more than 30 countries. Its workforce was slashed from 2,027 employees in 2022 to 1,704 in 2023, a reduction of 323 (16 percent) in just one year. Most strikingly, the number of teaching staff fell from 1,035 to 665, a reduction of 370 (36 percent). The fight against this profit-making company, which operates under the umbrella of the University of Sheffield, must therefore be extended into a broader struggle against the marketisation and privatisation of higher education.

This means challenging not simply individual attacks on pay and conditions, but the business model that places the reduction of labour costs and the extraction of profits ahead of the interests of educational staff and students.

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