

Strike by Sheffield Hallam University staff over 400 planned redundancies suspended by UCU

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On Friday September 19 the University and College Union (UCU) announced that four days of strike action at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in defence of jobs and conditions was suspended. The industrial action was planned from 23 until 26 September, following a ballot that returned an 87 percent mandate.

The strike was suspended by the UCU because Hallam's University Executive Board made a renewed offer the union will put to the membership. No details have been released about the renewed offer. The strike was called on the demands "No compulsory redundancies; Retaining existing employment policies; No breach of the framework agreement; No work intensification."

What can be predicted with confidence from the experience of previous disputes involving the UCU is that redundancies will be allowed to go ahead, under the cover of some form of voluntary scheme. In any case, suspending the industrial action on the eve of the strike weakens the position of the workers. The university administration has already seized on this to delay a planned pay rise for this academic year to July 2025.

The UCU's decision follows an established pattern, whereby a strike ballot is used only to nudge management to provide a slightly improved offer that preserves the essence of the cuts but allows the union bureaucracy to stand down its members.

In December 2023, the university offered voluntary redundancy to all 1,700 of its academic staff. Approximately 140 academics have already joined the severance scheme. Since then, the situation has grown worse, with Hallam announcing in May that another 400 professional services posts must go. SHU employs

around 4,500 staff, so job losses real and planned already figure some 10 percent of the total workforce.

According to the university, a fifth of staff will need to go as it prepares for a serious drop in enrolments. It aims to cut a further £15 million from its budget but has refused to provide details of exact plans.

Attacks on jobs are also an attack on student learning and on remaining staff, whose workloads will increase. The university is refusing to honour an agreed contract for Associate Lecturers, who were expected to move away from zero-hour contracts to fixed-term contracts in September 2023.

The UCU accuses Hallam of paying for extensive building projects at the cost of jobs. SHU has a £9 million hole in its budget for this academic year and is deeply in hock to the banks. Extensive new construction at the Sheffield city centre campus and a satellite campus in Brent Cross Town, London, on its own an £8 billion development, are to be paid for with across-the-board attack on staff and students.

University management claim the savage cuts are required by a sharp drop in international student applications. Last summer the Tory government, seeking to demonise all migrants, announced that from January 2024 onwards the vast majority of international MA students would no longer be able to bring their dependents to the UK while they studied. SHU hosted 5,205 international students in 2021/22, of whom 4,265 were studying for an MA.

The financial crisis and attacks on staff at Hallam are symptomatic of UK higher education as a whole. Its marketisation, coupled with massive reductions in government funding, have seen universities scabble to increase their margins by attracting as many students,

and hence fees, as possible—especially high-value international students who pay exorbitant tuition costs—including with glitzy developments, while squeezing staff and slashing the quality of teaching they are able to provide.

Administrations staffed by well-paid executives have embarked on a campaign of academic vandalism, including closing whole department—like Sheffield’s acclaimed Archaeological Department—and slashing tens of thousands of jobs.

Speaking to the *Financial Times* during the summer, Glen O’Hara, a professor of modern history at Oxford Brookes University—another university which announced an expansion of its own voluntary redundancy drive in March—described a particularly badly hit “squeezed middle” in the HE sector: broadly the post-1992 former polytechnics like Hallam and Brookes located in cities. These have had their student numbers eaten away by competition from institutions leveraging bigger brands and advertising budgets.

O’Hara explained, “The way the sector is behaving is totally at odds with the ethos of the lecturers, many of whom joined a state-managed profession to educate young people and now find themselves expendable employees in a now-corporate sector.”

Limited and uncoordinated industrial action has been confirmed by the UCU at Sheffield Hallam, Goldsmiths in London and the University of Winchester. But a list of locations where job losses and redundancy schemes are threatened, compiled by the Queen Mary’s, London branch of the UCU, currently contains more than 60 HE institutions.

At Goldsmiths, the union has announced only a “global academic boycott”. Staff have been involved in industrial action for months, but this has consisted only of day-long strikes, ineffective leverage action and other dead ends like a marking boycott.

At SHU, General Secretary of the UCU Jo Grady, who recently awarded herself a very large salary increase, has politely appealed to management “to urgently take stock and change course.”

The UCU’s suppression, division and handicapping of industrial action follows its 2023 sellout of the years-long dispute over pay, pensions and conditions, which paved the way for this new round of attacks. Its betrayal was part of a general rout of the 2022-4 strike wave, now completed with the ending of the BMA and

ASLEF disputes and being consolidated in partnership with the right-wing Labour Party.

Lecturers and university staff at Sheffield Hallam must draw the lessons of this recent history, especially of the UCU’s conduct of the national dispute over four years from 2019-23, which wore down workers’ militancy to the point of being able to impose a sellout.

A new perspective and leadership is required. Academic and non-academic staff must be unified, and all university workers with those throughout the education sector. Action must not be limited to disparate, one-off strikes.

This can only be achieved through a rank-and-file rebellion of the membership against the corporatist trade union leadership and a determined turn to workers, young people and students in a fight to secure high-quality education as a social right—an end to tuition fees and the marketisation of Higher Education, and massive increases in state financial support funded by taxation of the major corporations and the super-rich.

Workers at SHU who agree with this programme should contact the *World Socialist Web Site* about forming a rank-and-file committee to fight for it.



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