THE HIGHER EDUCATION WORKER MAY/JUN 2021

The HE Worker is a bulletin produced by supporters of Workers' Liberty working in higher education. Workers' Liberty is a revolutionary socialist organisation, active in the trade union movement, fighting for a socialist alternative to capitalism and Stalinism.

Wave of action in Universities to Fight Cuts

The summer term at UK universities has opened with direct action by students involved in rent and fee strikes — a last push in this academic year to win our demands. Student rent strike activists at Nottingham University, Sheffield Hallam, Sheffield University and Manchester University have occupied university buildings. When two Sheffield Hallam students were filmed being pinned to the floor by security guards, as they went into occupation in the Cantor building, there was a big push back on social media; this was seen to be typical of the way students have been treated all year.

Elsewhere — at Goldsmiths, LSE — online and in person rallies are being held in the next week. Keeping up momentum into next term is key. There will be no going "back to normal" for University managements, who will be pushing for cuts. Last weekend (24-25 April) an online organising school was held under the banner of "The Red Square Movement". Modelled on the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, which came out of the 2010 movement against fee hikes, this is a coming together of rent strike organisers. The school, organised by The World Transformed, Liberate the University and others had useful debates. We will be pushing for the movement to hold a policy-making founding conference which can consolidate national organisation and encourage the setting up of local activist groups.

An activist in Manchester Met UCU

Solidarity w/ Liverpool & Leicester staff!

UCU have now begun a global boycott of the University of Leicester, and 3 weeks of strikes are due in Liverpool. Both of these actions come in response to brutal attacks on jobs in both universities. We send our solidarity to those fighting back against management cuts, and call on the wider labour movement to get behind these struggles.

UCU Congress preview

UCU Congress and the Higher Education Sector Conference are being held this month and next (29&31 May, 2 June). The agenda is being compiled based on motions submitted by UCU equalities sub-committees and branches **(all of which are available here)**.

This year appears set to feature a number of debates on free speech. Some in the context of the government push for all universities to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of Antisemitism (*more on reverse page*). Some in the context of the government's separate demand for a "Free Speech Champion" and fines for universities that flout their narrow definition of free speech.

There are also good motions calling on the union to support ongoing international struggles, such as in Myanmar and Hong Kong, and for solidarity with Uyghurs facing serious repression (more here on why these are so important). Although it is not clear if these will be debated, we call on delegates to support these if they are.

Further motions demanding a combative strategy to defend USS pensions should be supported, and so too the building of a militant campaign to oppose casualisation that continues to downgrade pay and working conditions in HE.

Workers' Liberty members active in HE host regular online discussions, debate ideas and write on our blog. You can find out more about these by following the QR code, or visiting: www.workersliberty.org/HE

Staff-student solidarity & collective action to fight Covid cuts!

Uni Library Staff on the frontline

In the last academic year University Library Staff have been on the frontline in enforcing Government and University Covid regulations. While teaching staff and many admin staff have been working from home for most of the current academic year, in many University Libraries Library staff have continued to work face to face with students, supporting students in the usual way, but this year also being tasked as unpaid Covid marshals; enforcing mask wearing, distancing, checking Covid tests and enforcing the myriad of lock down rules within a University Library.

In my own Merseyside University Library, frontline Library staff have faced both the threat of Covid (with a number of us catching Covid, including one member of staff who subsequently died), and gained the ire of students as the enforcers of Covid regulations.

Staff have everyday faced abuse and derision from students when asking them to abide by health and safety Covid rules. University management frequently give contradictory advice to Library staff, Security staff and Students regarding abiding or not abiding by the rules.

On top of this, frontline library staff have received little support from management, who by and large have spent the last year working from home. Communication and support from our union Unison has also been sparse to non-existent.

As other University staff are asked to return in the coming months, they should be asking themselves these questions: will my union support me against unsafe working conditions? Do university management actually care? Can I remain safe at work? Maybe pop into the Library and ask the staff there, how they fared in the last year.

A Merseyside University Library Assistant and Unison member

The IHRA working definition & Universities: what's the problem?

Workers' Liberty members in HE support and campaign for maximum free speech and organising rights on campus, except for clear-cut fascists and where there is immediately dangerous incitement.

Universities are public institutions. Their policy-making should be both transparent and free from day-to-day political interference by the government.

We recognise the Orwellian double-speak of the government in their drive to "protect" free speech on campus. This is instead an exercise in clamping down on rights to protest and organise, and hit public institutions with fines as they themselves push back on so-called "wokeness".

As part of this free speech drive is the imposition of the IHRA working definition of Antisemitism. Whilst we believe this offers a useful educative framework to understand Antisemitism, the text does not form a set of rules and as such should not be included in codes of conduct, or be used to stifle free speech.

It is understandable why many Jewish students and staff will want the IHRA text adopted in university statutes: universities have failed in many instances to tackle bullying, harassment and abuse. We have to campaign for more resources to support students and staff who are victims of abuse. We need clearer and more effective university codes of conducts - ones which allow students and staff to seek redress without recrimination. We do not believe that adding the IHRA working definition into university codes of conduct will achieve these.

Read more here on the IHRA working definition, and free speech on campus.

Workers' Liberty Open Student Meetings!
School student, undergrad, masters, PhD? Join our student meetings, Mondays, 6-7PM. Zoom link here: www.workersliberty.org/students

17 May How to fight Sexism: with activists from Women's Fightback
24 May Solidarity with Deliveroo and platform workers: with IWGB couriers from Sheffield