

Safeguarding education: Why we take industrial action with a heavy heart

Published in the University of Sussex Students' Union paper The Badger 17 May 2010

Luke Martell

On 18 March hundreds of members of the University and College Union went on strike at Sussex. We aren't miners or postal workers. Picket lines of university lecturers can be an incongruous sight and striking doesn't come easy for us. But on 5 May we did it again. The lines were more like a carnival, thanks to student support. Lecturers politely handed out leaflets. Many had never been on strike or a picket line before. We took action with a heavy heart and a sense of guilt. We had to cancel seminars, lectures and essay supervisions. At union meetings packed with hundreds of members we had discussed what action to take. Worry about disruption to students was a dominant theme.

There are reasons for these actions. In November 2009 the management of the university announced plans to make 115 core workers redundant, if necessary on a compulsory basis. The redundancies are not based on the performance of staff. They have been selected as part of a plan to restructure the university, reducing certain areas. This makes it dangerous to become an expert on something the management may one day not approve of – an issue of academic freedom. Many of those on the list are among the most dedicated and skilled staff, who have made the university what it is. The plan involves the loss of a swathe of student advisors who help vulnerable students, work formerly done by lecturers not trained to do so. Nearly 10% of teaching staff will go. The implications for units such as the crèche, Unisex and IT support are well known. Academic areas that resources are being diverted to are ones where we are way behind our competitors. Areas where we have strong critical traditions and an edge over others stand to lose. There will be more cuts.

This is happening alongside big increases in spending in a number of spheres, one being management salaries, including the recent creation of more than a dozen new well-remunerated managerial posts. The top managers making the decisions are, unusually, all from outside the university. They haven't come through its ranks so it's difficult for them to be connected with staff and Sussex's successful traditions.

To many it feels like the caring and sharing parts of the university are under threat and the resources being transferred to the maximum money-spinners. The university has to make money. But money is a means for providing education. The most unpolitical of staff feel the means have become the end - they are being asked to provide education to make money. Other staff, fearing they could be next on the hit list, are understandably keeping their heads down.

Academic jobs are very specialised. Finding one you are qualified for can occur once every year or two, if that, and you may compete with 50 or 100 other applicants or more. It's more or less impossible to find work without having to uproot yourself and your family. For many academics, their sacking will mean long term unemployment or the end of their career, loss of structure and function to their lives, and financial adversity. Compulsory redundancy is no small thing.

We've had redundancies before and everyone recognises the current financial climate can't be avoided. But redundancies have been voluntary. UCU asked for the job cuts this year to be phased in

so those to go have time to find a new job. Brighton University are trying to avoid redundancies by not replacing staff who leave by choice.

Sussex UCU isn't a militant union. It didn't argue against cuts. It argued for more humane cuts. The union packaged its alternative savings plan, the 'Unique Solution', so that the university could market itself positively, as a consensual employer. UCU never pretended this was a complete answer, but a basis for working together. They waited weeks for the management's negative response. Months of negotiations were pursued before strike action was called. 80% voted in the ballot, unprecedented in the history of the UCU nationally, 76% for a strike and 82% for other action, such as an assessment boycott. Independent arbitration was turned down.

The aim was that the ballot would lead the management to negotiate on the Unique Solution. It was a strike ballot to avoid a strike. Throughout the UK universities have responded to votes for industrial action as indicating the feelings of staff, and pulled back from radical proposals, opting instead for consensus. Sussex is unusual in shunning such a path. Other universities have shown there are alternative solutions.

Industrial action is a last resort. Staff just want to do their job, providing the teaching and research that Sussex is hugely respected for. Students just want to do their degrees. We have disrupted your education for two strike days. We genuinely regret this and find it painful to do. We want more to be avoided. But this is about Sussex becoming a different, and less successful, university: key staff and courses lost, support for students hugely reduced, and education turned into a money earner, rather than something to be financed for the good of those who study here. Morale and community are being damaged, potentially irreversibly. Industrial action is about days of disruption to avoid years of disruption, to safeguard top quality education for the university's students, now and in the future.