

## Ruskin, the trade union college, is under siege Sue Ledwith

Ruskin College, Oxford, UK has long been a home and heart of education for trade unionists worldwide. But no longer.

Just as organised labour is under siege from globalisation everywhere, with the rise in precarious work and falling membership, so Ruskin is under assault. This is a call for solidarity in support of the tutors who have been made redundant as their degree courses for international trade unionists were cancelled.

A petition has been signed by more than 1 000 supporters from the UK, from across the global north and from the global south, expressing shock and anger and urging a management rethink. Some want the unions, TUC, Labour Party and other affiliates and allied organisations to challenge the College's actions: 'Let's have some action NOW,' wrote one signatory.

### Flagship courses cancelled

This all follows the new management's refusal to allow its flagship MA in Global Labour and Social Change – formerly International Labour and Trade Union Studies, ILTUS – to run with a record 23 students, likely to have been closer to 30 by the planned start in January 2017. The foregone income is about £200 000 for 2016-7. Partly as a result, the college claimed that it could not afford to run the ILTUS undergraduate and post-graduate degree programmes, swiftly making the three full time tutors/organisers redundant, and curtailing contracts of two more part-timers. Four of these are women and one is from a Black/Asian Minority Ethnic background.

These moves have left potential students from unions – activists and officials – with nowhere to study, and continuing BA students without experienced supervisors for their dissertations. Since these changes, management plan to downgrade staff pay, including for those involved with degree programmes. The implication that must be drawn here is that, if tutors are not being paid at the collective agreement rates for higher education degrees, the college can no longer run degree-level courses.

These decisions by the new management regime have reversed Ruskin's *raison d'être* since the former principal died suddenly in 2016. Chris Wilkes, an experienced educator and committed supporter of trade union and working class education for 22 years at the College, had championed these and other degree programmes, steering the whole organisation through some difficult financial and otherwise tempestuous times. He was a stalwart supporter of the College's working class education ethos, and

welcomed national and international visiting speakers and conferences. He also encouraged a self-supporting new research unit, and staff development: two of those recently made redundant were studying part time for PhDs in the field, which would in turn have fed back into teaching.

The management which succeeded Wilkes had limited experience of trade union education or Ruskin's history in the labour movement worldwide. Citing financial problems following government cuts, the MA was cancelled twice, leaving the prospective part-time students who had signed up to it, at about £7 850 a year, high and dry. Four were international students recruited to the one-year full-time MA, one of whom took an unpaid sabbatical from her teaching job in Tunisia to study at Ruskin, and all of whom spent time and money to get their visas. One full-time student even sold his home to fund his MA. Of the prospective part-time students from the UK, most were to be funded or partly funded by their trade unions, giving the labour movement a vested interest in the ILTUS programmes. Apparently, external examiners of these programmes were not informed that the course was not running. The college has also lost its contract to run the TUC Organising Academy.

The MA and BA ILTUS programmes, as well as the non-degree short courses for unions, are the core of what Ruskin was: 'the trade union college' serving international and national labour movements. Without these programmes, Ruskin becomes a hollowed out further education institution with only the trade union short-course unit left to provide union training.

All three of the discarded tutors were former Ruskin students, and the college's new claim that it has three full time staff (all male, against the College's commitment to equality and diversity) supporting the delivery of TU studies is disingenuous: it is unlikely that any of the remaining staff have the capacity or experience to deliver degree programmes. There is talk of redesigning the college's 'offer' – strange, since it is only 12 months since the MA was validated by the UK's Open University, which oversees Ruskin's degrees. A part-time tutor post in politics and social sciences, to teach across the MA, was advertised recently – even stranger since such tutors have just been made redundant.

### What now? Solidarity world wide

The implications for the international labour movement are significant. Small though the college is, it has worldwide reach. Students have often told us, ‘The president of my country was at Ruskin’. In the apartheid years, South African labour and political activists were welcomed and given sanctuary. There are buildings named after them, such as Kitson and Biko.

Ruskin was a place for labour activists and scholars from across the globe, especially the global south, to meet and develop strategy as well as their own skills and knowledge: leaders and lifelong friendships were made. This post from some who were horrified by events at Ruskin sums it up: ‘As a global union working with trade unionists from all over the world we found Ruskin degree courses were always a great way of extending solidarity and understanding.’

Further testament comes from signatories to a blog and petition deploring the attack on Ruskin. You can add yours at <https://friendsofruskin.wordpress.com/2017/03/24/defend-ruskins-ba-and-ma-courses/comment-page-2/#comment-103>

Among those who signed are current and former students, some of whom are trade union officials and activists; tutors and academics who have taught at Ruskin; and others such as former members of Ruskin’s governing council and external examiners. International unions are represented, like Public Services International and UNI. Signatories come from the UK, Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and beyond. Many are Global Labour University alumni and scholars, as Ruskin is an associate of the Global Labour University.

The key themes of their messages – anger at the ‘shameful decision’ and ‘terrible news’ – are summed up in a few of these posts:

- ‘As an ex-Ruskin student I am appalled. Ruskin was set up to educate the working class who had no other route to education involving the history of the struggles of the past and the trade union and labour movement. Ruskin was started by the trade unions. DO NOT LET THIS HAPPEN.’
- ‘This is one of the most important labour studies programmes in the world. It is also at the heart of what Ruskin has always stood for. Its closure would mark the end of the road for Ruskin as a distinctive institution.’
- ‘I am really angry at this terrible decision. It amounts to intellectual vandalism at precisely the time that the trade union and progressive movement needs to hone and develop its understanding of the relationship between bosses and workers.’
- ‘The loss of such programmes would be another kick in the teeth for the labour movement.’
- ‘This is an appalling decision by Ruskin College that will stain its

history unless reversed.’

- ‘Closure of the International Labour and Trade Union Studies BA and MA courses at Ruskin College amounts to human rights violation, union busting and suppression of rights of workers.’

And labour activists and academics noted in emails: ‘Yet another battle’, and ‘Ruskin abandons its history & trade union education. Shame on those who brought this about.’

### Learning denied

The staff who carried the BA and MA forward into this decade to make the degree programme the blue riband of the union education movement are those made redundant. I appeal to readers of this column to support them and save Ruskin for union education. I believe the labour movement is bigger than this management regime. After all, what is the rallying cry? Agitate, educate, organise! Let’s add strategise. Indeed, as one or two blog signatories have observed, this is what is at the heart of the ILTUS programmes: a praxis where education is not only about learning but about action and about changing the world. Perhaps the new management do not like such a challenge. As a former MA student observed: ‘There’s an irony that the very critical analysis encouraged on the course has done nothing to prevent its closure.’ And from some of the trade unionists who had signed up to the MA and twice had it cancelled underneath them, comes this view in a letter to the college management: ‘We have wasted a year expecting to begin our studies and, based on our experience of last year, we fear it likely that we will find out in June that the course will not run at all. This is not acceptable. We had chosen Ruskin because of its supposed commitment to trade union education – we do not feel that our experience to-date supports such a commitment. An institution which appears to fail to support basic employment rights does not appear to be a suitable institution to study for an MA in Global Labour’.

Meanwhile there is talk of boycotting Ruskin.

I write this with anger and sadness, but with muted optimism. I was the tutor who developed the MA ILTUS and ran it until my formal retirement, and I hope to see Ruskin’s labour phoenix rise again.

*Sue Ledwith worked at Ruskin for 10 years, first rejuvenating and running the MA Women’s Studies and then developing the MA International Labour & Trade Union Studies. She also ran a 6-monthly seminar series for women trade union activists and academics, and a scholarship programme for international trade unionists. In 2016 Sue gained her PhD by published work: ‘Prospects for Gender Democracy in Labour Movements’ drawing on 25 years of research in the field.*