

Report on UCU Congress 2018

Following the article in PSE 92, we print here the report made by Bob Jeffery to Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) UCU Branch. (Bob is anti-casualisation officer of SHU UCU, president of Sheffield TUC, and a Labour Party member. He attended the Congress as a delegate from Yorkshire and Humberside UCU Regional Committee.)

As some of you will be aware, I have attended UCU Congress 2018 in Manchester, as a delegate of the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Committee, but also representing Sheffield Hallam Branch. For reasons that are now beginning to get some media focus, this report will not be focusing on the many motions that were supposed to be getting discussed.

Two weeks prior to Congress commencing the draft conference programme was circulated which included two motions: 10 and 11. Motion 10 (submitted by Exeter University) called for a vote of no confidence in the General Secretary Sally Hunt, and Motion 11 (submitted by Kings College London), called for her censure. It is widely perceived that, following the unprecedented 14 days of strike action at pre-92 institutions in defence of their USS pension, perhaps the most well-supported national industrial action for decades, the General Secretary had sought to back down at the earliest opportunity. Even after branches led the 'no capitulation' movement to stop the first deal, Sally Hunt organised with UUK, the General Secretary and the UCU faction that support her (the so-called 'Independent Broad Left', IBL) misrepresented branches' wishes so that they could push for an e-ballot on a second deal with UUK, and then sent lots of emails directly to the members urging them to support the climb down. The anger amongst members that prompted these two motions to be submitted is therefore understandable.

Nonetheless, on the evening before Congress (29/05/18) we heard a memo had been agreed by a slim majority of the UCU's National Executive Committee. It argued that, because the General Secretary is an employee of UCU, censuring her or calling for her to resign, without following a proper disciplinary procedure, would be a breach of her employment terms and conditions. This argument

seems strange. The General Secretary may in some sense be an employee, but she is also the elected head of UCU. Furthermore, the Congress, as the sovereign policy-making body of UCU and the largest gathering of UCU representatives that occurs, surely must be entitled to criticise the General Secretary in between the elections that occur every five years.

In any case, when conference began on Wednesday, 30/05/18, it was not one of the two motions above that created a problem, but rather a late motion, submitted by the University of Sheffield and the University of Bath, calling for a 'democracy review' in UCU. This motion pointed to the fact that, apart from the General Secretary, all other senior officials in UCU are appointed rather than elected, and called for a review of this situation. This motion had been ruled out of order and was not to be included on the agenda. However, when Congress voted democratically that the motion should be discussed, the full-time officials of UCU, who are members themselves of Unite the Union, walked out of the conference hall and switched off the microphones so that Congress could not continue. This was to be the first of three walkouts over 30/05 and 01/06.

Negotiations with the Unite branch lasted all Wednesday morning and they were finally persuaded to re-enter the hall in the afternoon when conference agreed to change parts of the late motion. Yet, relatively soon, they walked out again when conference got to the point of debating motions 10 and 11. Essentially the whole day was wasted.

On Thursday 31/05/18, the second day of the conference, Congress splits into separate 'Higher Education' and 'Further Education' conferences. The full-time officials' 'industrial action' did not extend to these, so we managed to get through some

important motions dealing with the USS dispute, calling for a campaign over pay in HE, and drawing attention to increasing attacks on the national contract in the post-92 sector (which is extremely relevant to what has been going on at SHU).

When 'full' Congress resumed on Friday morning, difficulties returned. We debated and passed a number of late motions that included L8 ('the right of members to hold elected officers to account'). Nonetheless, the IBL faction attempted to orchestrate another vote so that the offending motions 10 and 11 would be taken off the order paper. Indeed, delegates voted no less than four times to keep the motions on the agenda. However, the officials walked out again at 11.30am. Sometime after the scheduled lunch break, at 1.20pm, we were notified by the Head of Democratic Services that they would not be returning. Congress was effectively over, having debated virtually none of the important motions of the conference, everything from equality issues to recruitment and organising, workloads and education policy.

Around 150 delegates (of about 250 total), including myself, decided to meet at the front of the conference hall to discuss our response (we had to gather in a circle to hear each other as the microphones had been switched off again) and, ultimately, agreed upon a statement (which follows at the bottom of this report).

As some of you may know, as President of Sheffield TUC I get some insight into what happens across the various different trade union bodies that exist in the UK, but what unfolded in Manchester seems to be unprecedented. Our own officials essentially took 'wild-cat' action to prevent a member of their Unite branch, who just so happens to be their boss and in many cases the person who appointed them, from being criticised by the supreme body of the ordinary membership of UCU.

The UCU is now at a crossroads. The General Secretary could have listened and responded to the motions criticising her; instead the officials disrupted two of the three days of Congress, wasting a huge amount of money, as well as activists' precious time. To call a 'trade dispute' as a mechanism to stifle democratic debate is truly shocking. It is my personal view that the General Secretary's position is now untenable and that all branches should be calling for her to go.

In other media, officers may have heard about the role of UCU Left (UCU-L) in all of this. It has been asserted that UCU-L is a front group of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). While it is true that there are members of the SWP in UCU-L, myself and many others are proud members of the Labour Party. Moreover, at the beginning of conference, UCU-L was even calling for the offending motions to be

withdrawn, precisely because we were concerned about the impact they might have on unity within UCU. It is also worth noting that none of the delegates of the branches moving motions 10 and 11 were members of UCU-L; they had strong mandates from their own members to bring forward the criticisms of the General Secretary.

Finally, I apologise for the length of this report, and some of the complexity of terminology! But all of this seems quite unprecedented, and as a branch I think it is important that we respond to this attack on democracy. This may seem to be a crisis-point for the UCU, but we must remember that this is *our union*, that *we are the union*, and we will continue our good work locally, whatever happens as regards the full-time officials that *we pay*.

Statement issued by 131 delegates at the end of UCU Congress 2018

#OurUCU

We UCU elected delegates voted repeatedly in line with the advice of our Congress Business Committee to hear motions criticising the General Secretary, which were in order. Unfortunately the General Secretary and a narrow majority of the National Executive Committee refused to accept the right of Congress to debate these motions. We believe the union members have the right to hold our most senior elected officials to account. This is a basic democratic right in all trade union and representative systems (e.g. Parliament). We disagree with the walkouts and reject the notion that the motions include a threat to undermine staff terms and conditions. There is no issue with the conduct and performance of our wonderful and hardworking UCU staff members. To turn a debate about our democratic process as a union into a procedural employment dispute is to evacuate our capacity to act as a political body. We resolve to continue to conduct the campaigns and defence of our members over pay and pensions that we all agree on and also to urge a debate in all branches and union bodies to discuss democracy in our union. We also resolve to continue the motions at a recall conference and not be distracted from the campaign to defend our members jobs, pay and pensions.