

Rank-and-file revolt in UCU

Rhian Keyse (*Exeter Branch delegate to UCU conference 2018*) offers a further perspective on the events there.*

The annual Congress of the University and College Union, held between 30 May and 31 June 2018, was a tumultuous affair.

With important motions on the agenda, seeking to tackle crucial issues such as casualisation, workload, and pay, to improve the union's internal democratic structures, and to set a position on other crucial struggles within the labour movement, Congress had the potential to be an important opportunity to chart the way forward for a union in transformation. Yet, in scenes described as 'surreal' by some delegates, Congress was suspended several times, and eventually prematurely shut down, as a result of three walkouts by UCU staff who are members of the Unite trade union and who declared a trade dispute with UCU.

Contentious

These walkouts were spurred by three contentious motions - one (Motion B19, which was passed in amended form) calling for a democracy review within the union tabled by Sheffield UCU, a motion of no confidence in the General Secretary (Motion 10) proposed by Exeter UCU, and a motion from KCL [King's College LONDON] UCU (Motion 11) censuring the General Secretary for the conduct of a controversial meeting of branch delegates and the UCU Higher Education Committee on 28th March 2018. Unite flyers handed to delegates on the opening morning of Congress suggested that these motions were an 'attack' on UCU staff's 'trade union rights', as they could be interpreted as a 'threat to the employment of our members'.

It is important to be clear that these motions referred only to the General Secretary, UCU's sole elected full-time official. They had been submitted in line with the proper procedures, deemed legitimate, and placed on the agenda by UCU's Congress Business Committee, which was published weeks in advance of Congress. No attempts were made to resolve any issues prior to the first day of Congress, when members of the KCL and Exeter delegations came under pressure to withdraw the motions, despite Congress voting several times to allow them to be heard. As the Exeter delegation stated after the first day of Congress, whilst trade unionists have a right to represent their members, in effect 'UCU national officials, acting as Unite members, derailed the supreme policy-making body of a sister union'.

Predictable accusations of factionalism soon followed, and efforts to discuss accountability and democracy within UCU were derided as 'tactical insanity' by Communist Party members who were delegates to Congress. Whilst factionalism has perhaps historically dogged debates within UCU, to see the groundswell of rank-and-file activism solely through this prism is myopic, and fundamentally misunderstands the nature of a union which has changed dramatically over the course of the last year.

16,000 new members joined the union between May 2017 and May 2018, a period which has also seen unprecedented industrial action against pension cuts in Higher Education and pay cuts in Further Education, as well as local triumphs such as campaigns at the University of Bath and the Open University which culminated in the resignations of both vice-chancellors. It is precisely

the growing strength of our union, and the revitalisation of rank-and-file activism, that has raised questions over the leadership and strategy at the highest levels of UCU. In her speech to Congress, Sally Hunt noted that, in the last year, UCU members decided to 'shape [their] own future' rather than 'sit here passively as the future shapes us'. Yet, union members attempting to debate the future of their transformed union have had their opportunity to do so shut down.

However, this is not a time for despair at the state of the union. The debacle of Congress, and its premature end, galvanised a majority of the delegates present. Although not all were in favour of the motions of no confidence in and censure of the General Secretary, many delegates felt that these debates should at least be permitted. After Congress was shut down, 148 delegates remained in the hall to draft a statement, under the name of 'OurUCU', asserting the 'right of Congress to debate these motions', and expressing concerns that turning 'a debate about our democratic process . . . into a procedural employment dispute is to evacuate our capacity to act as a political body'.

Appetite

The fact that the majority of delegates - from across the political spectrum within UCU - supported this statement demonstrates the appetite for fundamental change within UCU, and the desire to build a member-led union which serves the needs of those it represents. There will be a Recall Congress held at some point in the future, to discuss business which was not heard due to the walkouts.

Motions 10 and 11, which represent attempts to hold an elected official to account, must be heard, in order to restore confidence that our trade union is one where comradely discussion - and disagreement - can be heard, rather than an institution where dissent is suppressed by bureaucracy.

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Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.