

The Unite 'strike' at UCU Congress: an activist's view

We print below the view expressed by a Regional Observer who was present at the Congress, held between 30 May and 1st June. The author is a practising FE lecturer, branch officer and delegate to her Regional Council

'Before the Congress I had looked at the motions and noted that some would lead to interesting debates but assumed that because they had all been through the business committee they would all be debated. There were five motions that the UCU employees (members of Unite) took issue with, as they claimed they infringed the employment rights of their members. Three of these motions were revised by the proposers and were discussed as part of the business of Congress. Two others related to the behaviour of the General Secretary, Sally Hunt, during the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension dispute. One motion proposed to censure the General Secretary and the other called for the resignation of the General Secretary. Rather than allow the motions to be part of the business of Congress, the 'top table' and support staff of UCU walked out twice, on Wednesday and Friday! This behaviour resembled a wildcat strike because there was certainly no effort to follow TU law and declare a dispute. There was no indicative ballot or two weeks notice to the employer as the membership of the FE and HE sectors have had to do in their recent pay and pensions disputes. The chair of UCU suspended Congress twice!

My feeling is that there really needs to be rule changes to allow the General Secretary

to be accountable as all other elected representatives are. The GS is not an ordinary employee but an elected position. It is the job of a general secretary and conference chairperson to be unifying forces and justify their actions. If what the leadership of UCU did over the HE pensions dispute was not what the majority of members wanted, in my view, the GS should have apologised. It is not right for those in senior roles to over-rule the business committee or the majority of delegates.

I am of the view that many delegates who would have voted against the motion calling for the resignation of the GS are now so incensed by the attempts to interfere with the democratic process that they have changed their minds. I have never witnessed anything like it.

There now has to be a recall conference, because the two contentious motions were in the first ten motions, so, sadly, very little congress business was dealt with. It is not appropriate behaviour for an elected union general secretary, and had this been a local MP there would have been pressure on them to step down, or they would face censure and/or reselection. Is it not the case that those in elected positions are accountable to their electorate or membership?'