

Address to Congress

We print here the address given by incoming General Secretary Jo Grady on 26th May 2019 to the UCU annual congress in Harrogate.

(Grady was previously a lecturer at Sheffield University. Her candidature reflected the from-below movement that arose amongst rank and file lecturers in pre-1993 universities during the struggle over University Superannuation Scheme pensions, which the previous General Secretary, Sally Hunt, tried, unsuccessfully, to sell out. 115,311 ballot papers were distributed, and 25,638 valid ones returned. Of these, the UCULeft candidate, Jo McNeill, received 6,019 1st preferences, the official Matt Waddup 6,104 and Grady 11,515. When O'Neill's 2nd preferences were distributed, Waddup's total rose to 7,721, and Grady's to 15,214. Ed.)

When I decided to stand for this office, I talked to as many members in as many different parts of our union as I could, to see what they wanted from a rank-and-file candidate. Those conversations were the bedrock of my campaign. There was one in particular that I have kept coming back to.

I was talking to a rep in Prison Education. She was telling me about the conditions they work in and the threats which prison educators face to their health and safety, often thanks to the negligence of their private-sector employers. They teach classes of so many students it's potentially dangerous for them. They are often denied toilet breaks at work. They face extraordinary barriers to organising to improve their conditions.

Towards the end of our conversation, I had to ask her: how do you keep going? How do you do your job and maintain your professionalism in these circumstances? The answer she gave me was an answer I've heard from members everywhere I've worked and everywhere I've organised: we do it because we know how important education is. This person's mother was a prison educator too. Across generations, the family must have taught thousands of students, many of whom had never even learnt to read. You can't put a price on being able to leave prison, go home, and read books to your children at bedtime for the first time. Those of us who provide education see that it's a source of dignity and confidence, as well as opportunity, and that everybody in our society deserves it.

That commitment in the face of such pressure has been used as a weapon against us. As staff, we've allowed ourselves to be exploited. We've been told we need to do more, that we're not good enough. It's time to restore our sense of self-worth and remember how much power and authority we have.

We know what can happen if we do. In Further Education, staff have started standing up for

themselves: not just through local strike action, but through the FE Transforms initiative as well. In post-92 universities, we've already seen resistance to managers who use Teachers' Pension increases as a pretext to cast staff aside. In the last few days, the University of Winchester UCU branch prevented their employer from imposing compulsory redundancies on them.

But there's one action in particular that casts a long shadow over this Congress. A lot of the items on our agenda are a consequence of last year's strike, to save the USS pension scheme in pre-92 universities.

In many ways, my candidacy was a consequence of that strike. I can't have been the only member, or the only person in this room, who was apprehensive on the first day of strike action. Too many of us had served on branch committees for years, struggling. But this time was different. It brought out the best in us. It showed what our union could look like and how effective we can be, when we trust members to stand up for themselves.

That belief in all our members was what fuelled my candidacy. Our low-paid and casualised staff knew exactly what was at stake when we defended USS. I want to make them feel as central to our union's strategy as our USS members are: by bargaining assertively on their behalf, and by making it easier for them to take part in our Union. I have pledged to give members direct input, via 'task groups', into national campaigns on issues that cut across our different national committees. I have taken my cues from the vibrant and important work of fringe groups that deserve more support from our Union than they've had so far: from International and Broke, to the 1752 Group and their vital research, advocacy, and activism on sexual harassment.

No General Secretary can achieve these things on their own. In the past, we've seen unfortunate tensions between the General Secretary and UCU's national elected bodies. But now, starting with this

Congress, I'm confident we can work together. We have important motions to debate. We have motions to clamp down on non-disclosure agreements and exploitative short-term contracts. We have a raft of crucial motions to increase representation of migrant staff in UCU.

Perhaps most importantly, at this meeting and at the next instalment of Congress later this year, we vote on recommendations from the Democracy Commission: recommendations to make the leadership of our Union, especially the General Secretary, more accountable to members. I have no hesitation in reaffirming the commitment I made in my manifesto: to accept all our full-time union employees, and recognising the remarkable contributions they have made and will continue to make.

We all know from our experience in our branches, regions and nations how much we depend on our staff, and how effective we are when we work together. The Democracy Commission has judged that the implementation of rule changes needs to be negotiated with our staff.

I've made clear where I stand. I am your elected political representative. I will take responsibility for my decisions and actions, and I will never use staff as a shield to defend myself from criticism. But our staff have their own right to organise as workers that has nothing to do with me or my role. I will not interfere with that right, and the whole Union needs to respect it.

While we consider these internal rule changes, there are big external challenges on the horizon. Over the next few days, we will be discussing our response to USS and TPS pension changes that threaten the cohesion of our universities, and could ultimately threaten our colleges as well.

Our Prime Minister's political career is over, but the Augar review she commissioned could be published as early as next week. Its ramifications will be mixed at best for FE, and potentially disastrous for HE. We're set to see our managers, Vice Chancellors and principals reap the consequences of their bungling attempts to privatisate and marketise public education. It is up to us to make sure that they face the music, and we emerge with a strong, sustainable system. And this is all before we contemplate the possibility of a Brexit deal administered by an even more right-wing Prime Minister, who could completely isolate us from the European Union and the rest of our international comrades.

UCU is stepping into a moral, intellectual and political vacuum. Many employers have demonstrated that they cannot be trusted to look after us or our students. We outnumber them, and we are outsmarting them.

There is no problem which an organisation like ours cannot solve if we stick together. Congress is an opportunity to remind ourselves of that fact. The turnout for my election shows that thousands more members are watching us with renewed interest. So when you go back to your branches, let your members know: we are one union now, from professional services staff to prison educators, from the regions and nations to Carlow Street. We are the people who will stand up for tertiary education and research in this country, and we have each other's backs.

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.