

## DEMOCRACY AND DECISION-MAKING IN UCU

**Delegates to Congress will be discussing motions proposing changes to Branch Model Rules and regional Standing Orders, and for prioritising Congress motions.**

We welcome this debate on democracy in the union but we disagree with the proposals and we therefore urge delegates to reject them. Instead, we should ensure that any changes to model Rules and regional standing orders are properly circulated and debated in a timely fashion and then voted on at a future Congress. Our watchword should be: discussion first – then decide. **Below we set out why we believe such proposals are a dangerous diversion for the union.**

### **Servicing and organising models: Two views of democracy**

There has long been a debate in the trade union movement about which kind of model is most appropriate and effective - a servicing or an organising model.

A servicing model is one that sees a trade union's main role as being a provider of services to members, such as legal services, workplace representation, even cheap holidays and insurance policies. It is inherent to this model of trade unionism that members are seen as passive consumers of a business providing services to its 'customers'. It is the view that we pay our subs for individualized services provided by the paid staff of the union. This model therefore sees members as individuals with a range of personalised problems needing to be catered for.

A union based on an organising model has a very different starting point. It sees members of trade unions as participants who act collectively

to defend their conditions of service, jobs and pensions. **Casework and legal services play an important part in collective struggle but they are not ends in themselves.** What determines the ability of individual reps to defend members successfully is the extent that the union can mount national and local collective resistance.

These are thus two very different and opposing views of trade unionism which lead to two very different understandings of what is meant by trade union democracy.

Because the servicing model sees members of a trade union as passive consumers of a service its supporters do not place any real emphasis on building democratic structures. Elected representatives at branch, regional and national level are not important because their role is to provide a service not to debate policy and attempt to build collective action.

### **Collective action**

Because the organising model starts with an understanding that it is through collective action that members' conditions of service are best protected its supporters recognise that building democratic union structures is a necessity.

**Building the confidence of members to take collective action takes explanation, discussion and debate.** Therefore branches, regional organisation and conferences are essential to a union based on an organising model. They are not a luxury. It is through these democratic structures that members' worries, aspirations and doubts can be aired. They allow the best experiences and practice of members to be discussed and generalised.

UCU stands in the tradition of the organising model. But some on the NEC and in the leadership wish to take us away from this

model and replace it with a servicing one.

Of course there is always a fine balance between the most active members of the union attempting to offer leadership to the members who elected them, or who have voted for action in ballots, and listening to less active or engaged members. This is why our branches, regional structures, special sector conferences and congresses are so important. It is through these structures that members' views can be clearly identified and expressed. The national leadership should then act upon them. What should *not* happen is for some to undermine such democratic outcomes and find ways of *not* implementing them simply because they think they are misguided.

### **E-Surveys**

**Some have been arguing that branch/national e-surveys are more democratic than the branch meetings/sector conferences or congress.** This is a dangerous and mistaken view. Of course e-surveys and other digital media can play important roles in disseminating information and gauging members' views on certain issues. However they should never be seen as being more *accurate* ways of assessing members' opinions, or, crucially, a *better* or *more democratic* way of reaching decisions.

Members' opinions are not formed in isolation. Hearing all sides of an argument is essential if we are to make informed judgements. This is why branch meetings and other face to face meetings like delegate conferences are so important. They are the only real forums that allow all views to be put forward and debated, and decisions to be made in light of these.

Of course a member receiving an e-survey might be well informed about the issues that are put in front of them. However the pressure of work deadlines, bullying managers and so on are also part of informing an individual's opinion and therefore their decision on how they might vote for something. In this atomised position a worker is perhaps much more likely to vote against taking industrial action than when they are part of a collective debate and amongst like-minded individuals and away from the pressures of the everyday work experience.

Certainly this is clearly understood by

the enemies of trade unions. In the 1980s the Tories argued that their reforms would take back the unions from 'left wing bully boys' and trade union barons and give them back to the ordinary members. Sadly and ironically such Tory arguments are the same ones that some in UCU parrot today to justify their criticisms of participatory democracy.

### **Democracy**

Democracy within a union is not simply about fairness - it is much more important than that. The ability to be able to defend its members rests on a union's ability to organise collective industrial action. To do this it must convince its members that despite the sacrifice involved in taking such action they can make a difference. For this to happen there need to be active branches and regions that provide opportunities for members to debate, discuss and assess the best strategies to stop the government's and employers' attacks.

A genuinely member-led union must be one that is controlled from the bottom up and not the top down. UCU's structures are not perfect but they are based on democratic foundations where lay members' voices, at local and national level, can be heard.

**As the attacks on education and the public sector continue we need a union with democratic structures that facilitate our ability to resist these attacks as robustly as possible. Having effective services for members is obviously important but we must not lose sight of the truth that we cannot casework our way out of the crisis or the national scale of the assaults on education.**

## **UCU Left Conference**

UCU Left will be holding a conference in October. Discussions will include:

- \* Where now for the pay campaigns
- \* Fighting casualisation
- \* Defending public education

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