

UCU Left Congress Report 2012.

Last weekend's Congress and sector conferences reflected a growing sense of anger and frustration in the colleges and universities at the assault on education, education workers and students that we are facing.

There was a real sense of this anger even before the Congress proper had started. A briefing on the Thursday evening which had been called by five regions turned out to be a huge and angry meeting of at least a third of the Congress delegates and observers - at least 150 were present. They were almost unanimous in their condemnation of the state of the USS dispute, their frustration at the lack of leadership from the GS in the TPS dispute, and their rejection of the drive by the GS and her supporters to undermine democracy in the union.

There was an excellent and inspiring UCU Left fringe on Friday evening (170 present - our biggest ever) which again indicated the mood for resistance that is bubbling up in the colleges and universities as a result of the impact of the austerity measures, (see the photo).

The speakers – John McDonnell MP, Alfie Meadows from Defend The Right To Protest, Greek socialist academic Kostos Kourdoulis and a Canadian student leader of the CLASSE student federation by live link, and Liz Lawrence of UCU Left – gave a real international flavour of the solidarity that we need to defeat the austerity measures.

It was also an indication that UCU Left's arguments - around pensions, pay, democracy and so on - were really having an impact with delegates. We produced well-received daily bulletins for Congress plus bulletins for both sector conferences. Prior to Congress we had produced briefing documents on the TPS dispute and on the GS's proposals on union democracy and reducing the size of the NEC.

Also available for Congress was the excellent second UCU Left bulletin, 'Another Education is Possible' on sale for £1, which has already gone down extremely well. **Please contact Jane Hardy (janeannhardy@gmail.com) to get hold of copies.**

The first day (Friday) we met as HE and FE Sector Conferences.

HE Sector Conference

HE Sector Conference decided to recommend members vote 'no' to the final pay offer from the employers. The offer is 1%. It registered the cumulative loss of real incomes as a result of below inflation pay settlements over the last few years, and committed the UCU to a campaign for at least an RPI settlement this year.

There will be an electronic ballot of HE members on the pay offer this month.

We need to campaign to encourage all members in HE branches to vote for rejection in the ballot.

There were excellent debates at HE Sector Conference on performance management and workloads; defence of the public university and academic freedom; resisting privatisation; equality issues; and organising researchers and postgraduate students.

There was also a major discussion on the future of the USS dispute. Congress reaffirmed its determination to continue, and to win, the struggle to defend of the USS, and to reverse the employers' imposed changes. It did not accept that this dispute was lost. In the vote the convention was observed that only delegates from pre-92 HE branches voted. Very significantly delegates voted to resume sanctions in this dispute.

FE Sector Conference

The FE Sector Conference was very well attended this year, with lots of first time delegates. The debates took place in the context of the rapidly worsening impact of the government's austerity measures in FE colleges in terms of cuts to funding streams, falling recruitment due to EMA cuts, and attempts to drive up productivity through job cuts and attacks on our contracts.

Consequently delegates were united in their concerns that the union must fight hard over issues like pay, the use of punitive observations, the threat of privatisation, and the impact of cuts to EMA and ESOL.

Conference received, with some derision, a report on the current pay negotiations, in which we have been offered 0.5% in exchange for 'commitments to greater flexibility'. Delegates welcomed the recent news of the NUT/NASUWT agreement to campaign in the autumn around pay, pensions and workload and voted to seek joint action alongside them.

Observation practices, which were universally condemned as increasingly punitive and bullying, are an issue in the colleges. It was agreed the union needs to fight these both by seeking a national joint agreement with the AoC as part of our pay claim but also by seeking to link up the many college by college disputes which are breaking out.

The threats posed by austerity measures and ideologically driven government attacks on equality, health and safety at work, workers' rights of access to Employment Tribunals were condemned and decisions taken to campaign around these issues.

TPS dispute

On the Friday evening there was a one hour special session on the TPS dispute. Delegates committed the UCU to join other unions in the renewed defence of the TPS and public sector pensions in the autumn. Congress decided not to take strike action in June. Delegates commended the NEC for its attempts to draw public sector unions back into a coordinated battle for our pensions and decided to focus on building for action in the Autumn, along with other unions, including education unions.

The resolution from Barnsley College branch with various amendments was carried confirming support for a campaign of escalating action and recognising that one-day strikes alone were not going to budge the Government, however weak that Government is. In this session only delegates from FE and post-92 HE branches voted.

Autumn demonstrations

In the main Congress sessions delegates endorsed the TUC demonstration on 20th October on the theme of 'A Future that works'. This will be a major focus for anti-austerity struggles as will another demonstration called by the NUS in autumn in defence of education. There were also serious debates about the threats to Equality and equal rights in the workplace, the threats of privatisation and greater outsourcing, and growing threats to academic freedom and any residual notions of collegiality.

Union democracy and the size of the NEC

This debate took place in private session on the Sunday of Congress, alongside discussion of Rule changes.

While Congress was open to a reconsideration of the structures of the union many delegates expressed considerable concern about the speed and manner of the process proposed by the General Secretary. For this reason, they rejected her proposals for immediate implementation by a

margin of approximately 4:1, and established a Commission to consider structural reform over the coming year.

Congress was concerned that the plebiscite organised by the General Secretary did not properly inform members or allow prior discussion and reflection about the implications of the proposals to take place before voting. Discussion and reflection prior to decision-making was seen to be important, not the other way around.

As academics and educationalists, many of whom deal with the methods of organising ballots and surveys and opinion polls and referenda and plebiscites, there was also concern about the nature of the exercise conducted by the General Secretary. The process did not conform to any of the standard requirements of polling or surveying (full information provision, a balance of argument, and a non-tendentious identification of implications), and was thus in danger of drawing the reputations of union members, and the standing of our profession, into disrepute.

Congress did not reject the possibility of a reform of the size of the NEC but concluded overwhelmingly, as specified in the motions that are publicly available in the Congress agenda, that there should be a detailed consideration of any proposed reforms and their implications before a decision on constitutional change is taken by Congress next year. To that end, Congress agreed to establish a Commission of ten of its members to consult with branches, regions and the NEC, and to bring forward proposals for reform next year. Election of the commission from this year's Congress delegates will take place by mid-July.

Congress reaffirmed the UCU's commitment to wide-ranging representation of all interest groups in the union, not just the sectors (FE, pre-92 and post-92), a point made repeatedly by Equality and special interest representatives. Delegates were insistent, however, that this internal consideration of structures and processes must not interfere with the campaigns over pensions and pay and the defence of public education, or our resistance to the new managerialism that is becoming rampant in FE and HE sectors.

What next?

The union comes out of its annual congress therefore with USS action back on the cards, a decision to promote a strategy of escalating action and joint union campaigning in the TPS dispute, and a real potential therefore for putting the union at the heart of a hot autumn of resistance over pay, pensions and so on.

It is clear that we are now in a situation which offers enhanced opportunities for us to more effectively mobilise resistance in the colleges and universities to austerity and to defend post-16 education. This potential is one of the most positive aspects from Congress.

However, achieving this potential is going to take some serious organisation and planning from top to bottom in the union. We are engaged in both a political and an industrial battle, or rather a set of linked battles. We need to emphasise that after disagreements and debates have been resolved in the supreme decision making body of the union all should now recognise that the enemy is outside the UCU, not within it, and that we all have a common interest in fighting austerity and defending members' interests by making our union as strong and effective as possible.

This should be the point at which we all unite around the programme that Congress has democratically determined. Making realities of what we passed as policies over the weekend will require us all to push hard in our branches and regions in the coming days and weeks, and we need to have the lead from the top of the union to ensure that is carried out most effectively.

UCU Left played an important role at Congress not through numerically dominating the event (we were probably around only 25 - 30% of delegates) but through being able to present rationally our views on the key issues and work with others who do not necessarily support UCU Left but became convinced that what we were arguing was right.

It is important that we maintain and extend that willingness to work together to create a stronger Left in the union which is committed to building UCU, maintaining our presence in the forefront of industrial and political resistance to the Con-Dem Coalition's vicious policies, strengthening its democratic processes, and encouraging greater rank and file activity and influence from our branches and regional structures the better to fight back against austerity.

There are various opportunities for us all to do that. There was, for example, a proposal made at the 70-strong post-Congress caucus called by UCU Left that there should be a specifically pre-92 conference. Others have suggested a young members' conference next Spring. We have also, crucially, our advertised UCU Left conference on 22nd September in London which needs to be very big and as broad as possible in its composition. We need to sign people up for this before the summer break hits us in a few weeks. **If you have not yet signed up for this, why not do so now via the UCU Left website?**

There are two immediate tasks for UCU Left supporters. One is to build the defence campaign for Christine Vie, who has been declared compulsorily redundant by Manchester Metropolitan University. Please sign and circulate this petition today:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/supportchristinevie>

The employer waited until just after Congress to issue the notice of redundancy. Christine has served for 4 years on the UCU NEC and is a leading UCU activist at Manchester Met.

The other task is to build support and mobilise members for the two regional demonstrations called by the NUT and NASUWT on Saturday 14th July in Oxford and Sheffield, the constituencies of David Cameron and Nick Clegg. UCU members will welcome the opportunity to engage in joint activity with NUT and NASUWT in defence of education and the education workforce. These regional demonstrations will contribute to the build up for the TUC demonstration on 20th October.

Finally, it is axiomatic that the outcomes of Congress could not have been achieved without an organisation of like-minded members. We therefore urge every UCU member who agrees with the decisions of UCU Congress 2012 to become a member of UCU Left by signing up on the website www.uculeft.org and contributing to the building of a member-led, democratic, campaigning and organising union which is optimistic about organising to fight back.