

On Friday 25 January 2013, the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the UCU voted, *de facto*, to end UCU's role as a campaigning and fighting union.

By 33 votes to 23, the majority of the NEC (led by the Communist Party-dominated 'Independent Broad Left' (IBL) group) supported consideration at its March meeting of proposals from the union's Senior Management Team that could involve a cut of up to 27% in staffing costs, and thus in support for members and campaigns, and an end to the union's annual delegate Congress and FE and HE Conferences.

- **Retreat from a campaigning union**
- **Erosion of member-led union democracy**
- **Possible redundancies for UCU staff**
- **Pre-emption of Congress Commission on union structure**

Already, the decision of the General Secretary to go public with this issue in *The Higher*, has caused some difficulties for the union in negotiations with the employers, and surprise and consternation in some branches and regions.

Redundancies and democracy

By a similar margin (31:23), the NEC voted to reject a motion from Tom Hickey (Brighton, and representative of the HE South constituency) and Liz Lawrence (Sheffield Hallam, and HE North East) that proposed consideration of other cost-saving measures but would have *excluded* consideration of compulsory redundancies for staff, and any erosion of members' control of union policy through changes in the union's democratic structures.

In an attempt at least to rule out compulsory redundancies one NEC member proposed a separate vote on this question. The President of the Union, Cathy Taylor, then ruled against this from the Chair. Again, the majority of the NEC, led by the IBL, rejected this opportunity to rule out consideration of compulsory redundancies by supporting the Chair's decision (30:23, with 3 recorded abstentions).

Next steps

The Senior Management Team (SMT, composed of the General Secretary and the senior national officials, i.e. the senior UCU staff members) will now bring detailed proposals to the NEC meeting in March. If the NEC adopts these they will go for ratification to the national delegate Congress in June.

Background

Having bucked the trend of falling membership for its first five years, the UCU is now experiencing membership contraction as a result of the shrinkage of the sector, the retirement of older lecturers, and the difficulty in recruiting younger staff on casual contracts. An extrapolation of these trends suggests that the UCU

will face a financial crisis in the near future, as income from subscriptions shrinks, and expenditures rise faster than inflation.

The SMT proposals

Supported by the majority on the NEC, the General Secretary and the SMT proposed a range of measures. These were not circulated to NEC members until the Wednesday prior to the NEC meeting, providing only one working day for their consideration prior to the meeting of the NEC. These proposals included:

- reduction of up to 27% in UCU staffing costs;
- seeking cost-saving arrangements with other unions;
- ending of annual, national Congresses;
- reduction in the size of the NEC;
- reduction in the frequency of NEC meetings;
- reduction in the number of NEC sub-committees;
- reduction in the frequency of sub-committee meetings.

Pre-emption of Congress Commission

These proposals will constitute an attempt to pre-empt the report of the Commission set up by members' delegates to consider changes to the union's structures of representation. The Commission was due to report to the next Congress in June. The majority on the NEC had already voted last year to establish its own rival Commission to report to Congress. Now there is, it would appear, an attempt to bounce Congress delegates by an argument of financial *force majeure*.

Opposition

Opposition to the proposals was *not* on the basis that *nothing should be done* about a possible future financial crisis. It was rather that the union needed to expand its density of membership across the board, consider a graduated increase in subscriptions, reconsider the benefits of its current asset holdings, and make itself more attractive to non-members by mounting vigorous campaigns to defend Further and Higher Education, and to defend the pay and conditions of lecturers.

Critics of the SMT proposals argued that to erode the democratic structures of the UCU would create even more difficulties in forming effective, well-supported policies, and mobilising for campaigns to which the members of the UCU were committed. Cuts in staffing would also adversely affect campaign mobilisation but would also damage recruitment and branch building, and effective coordination of defensive action and representation.

Motion on an alternative strategy

Despite the short notice that had been contrived, a counter-proposal was tabled by Tom Hickey and Liz Lawrence. This motion argued that the NEC believes:

- that the key to rebuilding an active subs-paying membership is through a union that is recognised as a campaigning union, organising not only at a local level in individual colleges/universities on behalf of individual members but also on a national level over, jobs, pay, pensions, privatisation and education cuts;
- that many of the proposals suggested in (the SMT paper), if implemented, would lead to a race to the bottom, leaving the union without the ability to launch effective campaigns nationally, unable effectively to defend members and course provision locally, and less able to provide an adequate service to members individually;
- that the SMT proposals offer a false choice between delivering support to members, on the one hand, and staff costs and the union's democratic structures, on the other - it attempts to play off staff costs against democracy;
- that without structures that allow accountability between the elected officers and representatives, the fulltime national officials, and the lay members, the union will not be able to build a powerful and relevant organisation able to defend both its members and the further, adult and higher education sectors;
- that the proposals constitute an attempt to preempt the recommendations of the Commission established by members' delegates at the last Congress.

The motion sought to get the NEC to resolve:

that the final budget proposals to be presented at the March NEC **must not** have proposals for –

- compulsory redundancies of staff;
- altering Congress from an annual to a biennial event;
- reducing sub-committees or the frequency of their meetings;
- reducing the delegate base to Congress or conferences;

that the final budget proposals **should include** –

- a formula for raising the subscriptions rates progressively in line with members' salaries;
- a formula for moving UCU subscription rates towards those of other comparable F/HE unions outside the UK;
- ways to reduce the expense of union conferences by using more moderately priced hotels and venues and entertainments;
- a report on the advantages and disadvantages of moving from property ownership to property rental for HQ and regional offices.

The debate

Moving the alternative position, Tom Hickey argued that it was important not to exaggerate the financial threat. There was a medium term problem but simplistic extrapolation of current trends did not take account of the substantial potential for the UCU to grow in current circumstances. Even with contracting FE and HE sectors, the UCU can grow substantially, and increase the density of membership in each institution, as long as it can demonstrate its capacity to defend members' jobs and conditions, and the public education system to which the vast majority of staff are committed.

Currently, of the three things it needs to demonstrate this capacity, the UCU has two: a committed and highly able staff both at Carlow Street HQ, and in the regional offices, and a democratic structure that enables members to control policy through branch and regional meetings, through annual Congresses, and via its elected committees and their sub-committees. The latter is what makes the UCU a member-led union, and not one controlled by its senior staff and thus more interested in organisational stability than in defence of members' interests.

What the UCU does not have is a strategy to defend members' pensions, to preserve salary levels against continuous reductions in real income via sub-inflation settlements, to resist the commodification of education and the decline in access and student numbers, and to preserve a public educational system from either creeping or dramatic privatisation.

The leadership that the union needed was in these policy areas. That was what would enable it to attract new members, and justify its required subscription rates from existing members. The proposals from the General Secretary and from the SMT did the opposite. If carried through, they would deprive the union of the capacity to do any of the crucial things: to defend terms and conditions effectively at institutional level, to mount effective national campaigns, and to recruit new members and create an effective organising structure at branch level.

'There is no alternative'

Speaking against the motion, and in favour of the SMT proposals, Alan Carr (the Honorary Treasurer) argued that the situation was extreme, that the NEC needed to 'face reality', and that there was no alternative to these proposals if the union was to be rescued from an impending crisis. Others argued that there needed to be structural impediments to the union declaring industrial action in defence of members unless there was substantial support for action. Yet others argued that, however reluctant they were to countenance staff redundancies and an erosion of union democracy, the survival of the union was the most important objective.

Reply

Replying to the debate, Tom Hickey argued that this was not about ignoring the situation ostrich-like. It was about considering alternatives to a strategy of retrenchment, defeat and a culture of spiral decline.

That required a vision of how the union could grow in density even in a shrinking sector. Such a vision required a strategy for defending jobs, pay, pensions and conditions. That itself could not be delivered unless the UCU was committed to resisting the Government's plans for the shrinkage and privatisation of the sector. The linkage of the union's industrial and political concerns was being forced upon it. It was not even an elective choice.

Replying to Alan Carr, he argued that there was always an alternative. Whether an alternative was pursued was a matter of political will and determination, and what vision there was for the future of the UCU.

To start with a programme of cutting staff and dismantling the union's democratic structures **was exactly the opposite of what needed to be done**. In that sense, the contributor who said that this was a question about for what the UCU existed was exactly right, though she was speaking against the motion. Was it going to be a union defending public education, and the conditions and pay of its members, or was it going to be an insurance policy for individual lecturers? The latter was a guarantee of decline for the UCU, and its ultimate absorption as a minor element of a general educational union.

Voting

The NEC first voted as follows:

For the **SMT proposals**: 33 (including, and led by, members of the IBL)
Against the proposals: 23 (including but not exclusively member of the UCU Left)
Recorded abstentions: 1

For the Hickey/Lawrence **motion**: 23 (including but not exclusively members of the UCU Left)
Against the motion: 31 (including, and led by, supporters of the IBL)
Recorded abstentions: 1

On the issue of **compulsory redundancies** (voted as a challenge to the Chair's ruling that this not be treated as a separate issue) -

For the Chair's ruling (i.e. keeping compulsory redundancies as an option): 30
Against the Chair's ruling: 23
Recorded abstentions: 3