

## **Defending Further and Adult Education: A response to Anya Cook Newcastle College UCU Branch Secretary**

We welcome the contribution from Anya Cook UCU Newcastle College branch secretary to help inform the commission into effective industrial action strategy. In conjunction with members of UCU London Region we have written a response to your paper as a contribution to this debate.

The title of your paper is '***Our working environment is the students' learning environment.***' The sentiment behind this statement we fully agree. But it's important to understand where it came from and what lay behind it.

This slogan was borrowed from our colleagues in EIS (the Scottish education union that FE lecturers are in). Their slogan was, '*the conditions that lecturers teach in are the conditions that students learn*' and was part of their successful national campaign over pay, which included strike action.

What lay behind the slogan was an understanding that you cannot separate the aims and interests of those who work in the sector from those who learn in it. Too often employers like to attempt to take the high moral ground within the sector. As if it is only they who have the students' interests at heart. What our colleagues in Scotland demonstrated by putting forward this slogan was that taking strike action over pay was not a narrow self-interested strike but one that was about the learning and teaching environment of students and staff as well.

### **Competition: the main driver behind narrowing of provision and deteriorating conditions.**

The problem with your paper is that it offers no understanding as to why the educational provision within the sector is narrowing and conditions of employment are worsening. Competition rather than planning is the root cause of the problems that students and staff face in the sector. The desire to outdo their neighbouring college by competing for students shapes the employers thinking. It is this that drives the constant spiral upwards of workloads resulting in a race to the bottom.

We find it odd that there is no criticism of the NCG, the pioneers of the competitive super block model in your paper. Over the last ten years or so the NCG have presided over some of the worst attacks on members' conditions and a sycophantic acceptance of successive governments' agendas.

There might have been a change of style of leadership within the group from its earlier confrontational style of management but it is still carrying through a model that is one of the main obstacles to producing a planned FE sector. The NCG acts more like a multinational company than an educational provider. Unfortunately, not only has it gained a college from London, against the wishes of the vast majority of those who work there, London employers are copying the super group model too.

There were forty colleges in the London area before the area reviews. Now many are pulled together into groups. Some employers have attempted to argue that this will lead to more planning and cooperation between colleges.

Of course, experience shows us that this is an extremely unlikely outcome. The truth is rather than forty different colleges competing with each other there is now a number of powerful super blocks competing with each other. This will lead to an intensification of competition. This in turn will lead to a further driving down of working conditions and a narrowing of educational provision as these super blocks become more and more remote from the communities they are supposed to serve.

Therefore, any alternative we put forward must have at its centre the need for a planned Further Education sector.

### **The need for an alternative**

We also agree with that we can't simply say what we are against and that we must say what we are for. However, in your paper you say, *'The left traditionally 'objects' to circumstances without putting forward alternative actions.'* We are not sure how you have arrived at this conclusion, but the history of unionised teaching and progressive thinking paints a very different picture.

We understand we are all busy attempting to juggle work, family and trade union commitments however it is important that leaders of the union at all levels keep up with what initiatives have been taken so that we can generalise the best experiences across the union to benefit our members and students.

Since its inception UCU has attempted to develop a strategy that links the educational needs of students with the economic needs of those who work in post-sixteen education for the reasons spelt out above. One of the first attempts at this was produced by London Region in 2007, *'A manifesto for FE'* (see attached). Again in 2013 we launched a ten point charter for FE called *'Putting FE at the heart of the community'* [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6900/A-ten-point-charter-for-the-future-of-further-and-adult-education/pdf/ucu\\_fe10pointcharter\\_apr15.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6900/A-ten-point-charter-for-the-future-of-further-and-adult-education/pdf/ucu_fe10pointcharter_apr15.pdf) and more recently in response to the development of the super blocks we launched a campaign to introduce a London-wide contract called *'A capital contract for all'* (see attached).

All these have been supported and promoted by the union nationally.

Alongside these we have organised numerous lobbies of Parliament including ones over the defence of ESOL provision which successfully defended ESOL budgets in London and out of which came a national campaign, *Action for ESOL*, which produced its own manifesto (we have copies if you wish to see one).

Whilst we have not always been successful in defeating the attacks that have been launched against FE we have managed to put forward alternatives that have been and are being taken seriously. In fact, the Labour Party policy on FE has been directly shaped by policy that has

been put forward in our branches and passed at sector conferences. Last year London region organised a conference called, ***'Defending Further and Adult Education: Shaping the Future'*** at which Gordon Marsden, the shadow minister for FE/HE lifelong learning, spoke and a campaigning video was launched with the leader of the opposition Jeremy Corbyn being interviewed by our students - click here to see video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YqFHRvrVqQ>

### **Are the employers the 'enemy'?**

One of the areas of your paper that concerns us most is your attitude towards the employers. You call upon the union to stop 'demonising' the employer as the 'enemy'. You urge us to seek common ground and partnership with the employers.

The first problem we have with this is that you seem to suggest that it is the union and its members that are the barrier to bringing about a more reasoned approach to industrial relations. Approaching negotiations with the employers with this understanding will put the union representative in a weak position.

***We must always remember the old adage that officers are there to represent members' interests to the employers and not the employers' interests to members.***

We also feel that it is a naïve position for a union representative to hold. Of course, the main issue is government funding and we must always aim our fire on them. Indeed, there are many principals who agree with us about the need for more funding and will join us in campaigning. We in London have shared many platforms with them to further this cause.

But we cannot derive from this that, because it is the government's fault, members should just 'suck it up' and work with employers to make things a little more bearable. This is hardly a convincing strategy. Especially where those CEOs/principals agree with competition and the market, which many of them do, as being a necessary ingredient to the success of the sector.

Any strategy that bases itself on the acceptance of this can only lead to putting management interests before members. Attempting to merge members interests with that of managers has led you to conclude, ***'Concessions that are won by industrial action are rarely to mutual benefit and can only presage future antagonisms'***

We very much doubt that those members (and students) in branches that have won significant victories (and there are many) over pay, conditions, observations and job losses etc. through taking industrial action will agree with you.

'Antagonisms' are inbuilt into the very nature of our institutions. They are not caused by workers taking industrial action in defence of their working conditions. The existence of a trade union movement is predicated on the basis that it is the system itself that creates those divisions and workers need organisations that protect their interest to attempt to overcome these divisions. After all, employers are often very quick to use the full power and might of the state to maintain their position. The only response employees, such as

teachers, have available is to use their limited range of collective tools to resist the imposition of poor pay and conditions by intransigent (or worse) employers.

Strategy to win

Overall, we feel that your paper is out of touch with members' attitudes. You make **grand claims like**, '*Strike action is not popular with members nor supported by the majority of the wider population.*' This is again not true. Every opinion poll over the past five years has shown that the public (which our members are a part) support strikes.

**It is clear from our union's experience** that the branches and regions that have pursued a campaigning strategy that unites the defence of education with the defence of conditions are the ones that have the best conditions and have been more successful at defending a wider learning experience.

This has been achieved by recognising that strike action, alongside other unions where possible, must be a central part of our armoury. Every branch needs to develop the capacity to be able to deliver such action not just at a local level but also at a national level. Unfortunately your paper, **by accepting so many of the employers'** concerns, makes this goal more difficult for branches to achieve.