

UCU The vote is YES

LEFT <<<< Unite to Defend USS



Members know they have to fight to defend their pensions. But despite the weakness of the UUK offer, the hope that the Independent Expert Panel might sort out the valuation and reduce the ‘deficit’ swayed most members to vote Yes. Of course, members were influenced by the four emails from our General Secretary, Sally Hunt, urging them to accept. Even if they did not agree with her argument, the fact that she took such a strong stance for Yes gave members the impression they were being abandoned by the union leadership, and that UCU would not fight to win if they voted No.

Most members did not get a chance to discuss the offer with colleagues before voting because they were on leave over the break. Branch meeting after branch meeting reported that when members did discuss the offer they concluded it was right to vote No.

A Yes vote does not mean that the dispute is over. Far from it. The union now has a complicated dual task: keeping up the pressure for the best outcome from the Independent Expert Panel and, at the same time, maintaining our organisation so that if the outcome is a pension cut – as is likely – we are able to ballot for industrial action and carry it out effectively.

A Yes vote does not necessarily mean stopping the strikes. USS bodies or the Pension Regulator may sabotage the offer. There would be huge anger if this happens and we will need to put the action on.

Indeed, maintaining our ability to restart strike action like the fantastic 14 days last term is our best leverage to get the outcome we want from the Independent Expert Panel. UCU has seen gigantic picket lines with hundreds of members on them.

Members have gained in confidence as they have learned that their strike action can stop the university. Graduate teaching assistants, hourly-paid staff, researchers and other staff on casualised contracts have been the mainstay of many picket lines.

We can take demonstrative action short of strikes. Branches should continue to campaign and protest, and target UUK and hawkish employers. We can take protest action even if strikes are called off.

This Yes vote is not a vote in confidence in the UUK! Members do not trust the employers, or the USS scheme actuaries who promote the idea that the USS scheme is in deficit. This ‘deficit’ is allegedly bigger than in 2014, despite assets having boomed by 12% pa for the last five years to £60bn. Members know the ‘deficit’ is not real but a mathematical extrapolation. Change the assumptions and the projected deficit grows or shrinks. So when the UUK referred to ‘affordability’ and ‘broadly comparable’ pensions, our members are unconvinced.

This is why it is important that UCU should spell out to all concerned, including the employers, that our aim is to secure the best outcome for members in the current valuation: the status quo or better. Members voted for strikes and joined the union because they are sick of cuts in their pensions.

This is perfectly achievable. If the ‘deficit’ shrinks to around £3bn or so, or the employers accept a greater level of risk, there will be no need for either increased contributions or reduced scheme benefits. A ‘no cuts’ (‘no detriment’ or ‘status quo’) outcome is possible, even if the employers do not want to make this commitment in advance.

What we need to do

We will need a strategy with several elements.

First of all, **UCU will need to maintain branches at a high level of readiness** to restart action should any aspect of the Independent Expert Panel process unravel. Branches that voted to reject the offer could use their strike mandate to demand commitments of compensation from their employer for any losses arising from the Expert Panel report. (It is after all what UCU said at the beginning of the dispute.)

At the same time we need to be clear what we are fighting for. In the USS e-ballot the idea of seeking an upfront commitment to ‘no detriment’ was opposed by the General Secretary. This is a strategic question on which we might disagree. But the demand for no detriment is just a basic trade union position of opposing cuts! UCU needs to set the record straight. **UCU must clarify in its public statements that our central objective is to protect USS against cuts in value for money for scheme members, and any changes will be evaluated against that goal.**

Reaffirming existing policy, UCU should openly and publicly campaign against a de-risking investment strategy for USS, lobbying employers and the Government to support it. If the current de-risking plan is abandoned, the ‘deficit’ will shrink, abandon de-risking and even disappear.

To facilitate the debate and to advance the union’s position within it, UCU should call a Pension Conference open to the public, at which members of the Expert Panel will be invited to participate.

The second aspect concerns internal union democracy and debate. The various national meetings and the e-ballot has caused reps and activists to be rightly concerned about who makes decisions in the union and how these are made. UCU’s Higher Education Committee (HEC) did not vote for UCU to recommend a Yes vote, but the General Secretary sent four emails asking members to vote to accept. This must not happen again.

UCU must immediately call a recall delegates meeting and recall HEC. The delegates meeting should be constituted on the same basis as a Higher Education Sector Conference in terms of delegate entitlements and rights to call votes. We believe that the HEC should get behind the call (already made by twelve branches) for a special Higher Education Sector Conference to discuss the USS dispute. UCU should expressly invite branches to submit Late Motions on the conduct of the dispute to the scheduled Higher Education Sector Conference in May.

The union will need to determine democratically the process for electing members of the Independent Expert Panel, and how the process

will be monitored and reported to members. As soon as the process, parameters and timescale is known, branches and reps will need to understand how they can feed into it, crucially, in extracting commitments from their own employers.

Finally, we have to begin a debate about how to prepare for the next round of strikes. UCU’s *Commission on Effective Industrial Action* was set up at last Congress to review our industrial action strategy. We think that it now could have a useful role in developing the debate in USS branches. We propose that members of the Commission should tour branches to debate its conclusions and review the lessons of the dispute. We need to debate among reps the next steps and prepare the ground for winning a future Industrial Action Ballot and taking future action should this prove necessary.

The best way to secure the best outcome for members’ pensions is to remain organised and vigilant. We must plan to restart our action with the confidence that members know their strikes are effective. Beware the risk that the employers will try to use the academic calendar to their advantage: announcing cuts in the summer, say, or playing the long game and announcing cuts next March forcing us to ballot for action hitting exams. We should be confident that our members will rise to the challenge. What will matter is that union branches organise the necessary meetings, debates and initiatives to allow them to do so.

What do we do about the General Secretary and the Higher Education Committee?

The General Secretary must not be allowed to substitute for the elected negotiators. Yet she negotiated the UUK offer behind the back of the elected negotiators and HEC. Worse, she publicly quoted the employers’ resistance to the union’s demands as a reason for the union putting the offer to members. Then she put her name to repeated messages to members urging them to vote Yes, despite the fact that the HEC only voted to put the e-ballot to members, not to make a recommendation to vote Yes or No.

Members are right to be angry about this. Several branches have passed messages of ‘no confidence’ in the General Secretary. We have no desire to personalise the issue but she must publicly affirm that negotiations must go through the proper channels. And if she is not prepared to carry out UCU policy then she should stand down altogether.

As for the HEC, there remains a general question about how decisions are conducted and reported, and who HEC members are accountable to. What is clear is that we need to build new democratic structures to conduct the dispute and not trust the HEC to get everything right.

- Sign the unity statement for democracy at www.ucuunitedfordemocracy.wordpress.com/unity-statement