

Report back from Higher Education Consultation Conference - Fri 24th Nov 06

Recent pay dispute, lessons for the future

I was delegated, along with Bill Beaumont, by Bristol University UCU committee to attend this conference. The conference met to assess the implementation and outcome of the recent pay dispute and to explore some of the lessons that could be learnt for the future.

The discussion, which I found very useful, was set clearly within the context of a tightening economic climate, in which Gordon Brown wants to keep public sector spending down to 2%, with HE facing continued under-funding and increased commercialisation bringing the market into Higher Education leading to competition and fragmentation. The conference explored how we should fight the new challenges this presents us. In particular, how we can fight to preserve HE pay and terms & conditions.

Conference identified that we face threats to national pay bargaining; the fragmentation of HE; increased workloads; increased casualisation; threats of compulsory redundancies; the drift towards locally (or even individually) determined pay due to local implementations of the national pay spine in conjunction with the REWARD agenda.

Against this background conference first of all recognised our strengths demonstrated in the dispute. In particular the determination of our members who carried out the assessment boycott and who should be commended for maintaining that very difficult action. The conference also discussed the many new union members who had been radicalised and brought into activity by the dispute.

Learning from the weaknesses of the pay dispute

In an attempt to learn from mistakes the conference identified some of the weaknesses of the dispute:

- a) Our industrial action was suspended without a ballot of members. The assessment boycott was time-limited action that would be of no use after the exam period, therefore we were effectively demobilised by our own negotiators. When members were balloted one third of voters voted against the offer demonstrating a significant level of disquiet.
- b) Failure to secure the catch-up element, the main plank of our dispute. Although the final deal did secure an improvement over the employer's original offer, it failed to address the key issue i.e. erosion of salaries which members were determined to see reversed.
- c) Concentration on one strategy i.e. the assessment boycott to the exclusion of all other forms of action. When the employers escalated on their side in the form of punitive pay deductions, our negotiators failed to escalate or diversify the action on our side.

The two chief negotiators of the pay deal were called upon to explain how they had operated during the dispute. This was followed by a very positive and interesting discussion on a series of motions all offering concrete suggestions to how we should respond to the pressures facing the new UCU as outlined above.

Motions debated

Many of the motions addressed the weaknesses of the dispute and offered ways to avoid the same problems in the future. For instance, a key motion that was critical of the leadership's reliance on one strategy, i.e. the assessment boycott, a form of action that would become ineffective after the exam season, and called for more inclusive action to be used in the future including strikes; rallies and demonstrations to build confidence and to keep the issue in the public eye. It also argued that, as the key element of the dispute i.e. erosion of salaries had not been reversed, this should be revisited once confidence had been rebuilt.

Members at Edge Hill and also at Kings College were informed that the dispute was over, by their own management rather than the union. This led to motions calling for more union democracy, and for the union to be member lead, with a greater role for lay reps. in the future. Specifically, on the ending of industrial action, the conference voted that in the future, an offer must be put to ballot before suspension of action, that no ballot should be held unless the key elements of a claim are met, and that time should be allowed for emergency branch meetings before calling off action.

One motion called for a sustenance fund, i.e. a hardship/strike fund, to sustain industrial action. This would have been very useful particularly in the situation where our members were facing pay docking.

There were motions on workload, and working conditions, arguing that these had got worse due to continued under funding, and calling for these to be made key campaigning issues for the new union. Other sections of this same motion, argued against casualisation and for the elimination of hourly paid contracts, and recognising the continuance of low pay particularly amongst non academic staff, called for solidarity with other unions, as we may require solidarity ourselves sometime, and also for a flat rate element to our pay claim in future.

Voting overwhelmingly in favour, most delegates agreed that there was a serious threat to national pay bargaining and a high profile campaign was necessary. It was felt the greatest danger would be in the third year of the current pay deal. It was agreed that local variations on the Framework Agreement and resultant local pay spines and local terms & conditions were a move away from national pay bargaining. These local variations had in some cases gone beyond local pay bargaining; to performance related, or even individually determined pay. The conference reaffirmed our commitment to national bargaining, and resolved that if necessary we would mount campaign of industrial action to defend it.

A motion also argued that we should fight for convergence of pay and conditions to the best in the sector, and called for a more equitable distribution of funds in year 3 of the current deal, not based on 'affordability' and the vying of funds between institutions. Indeed, one academic-related contributor argued that we should get back to real national pay bargaining, i.e. against the local grading structures. Conference believed that keeping HE integrated was one of the best ways to defend pay and T&Cs.

Conclusion

Most of the motions were carried by 2/3rds to 1/3rd, one or two were carried unanimously; or overwhelmingly such as the motion to fight to preserve national pay bargaining.

I voted in favour of every motion that was debated. I am a member of UCU Left and I hope the conference was a reflection of a new union that is prepared to fight. I also believe the union should take a stand on the wider political issues in the world around us, for instance I am glad that the AUT at its final conference affiliated to Stop the War Coalition, not before time, even the neo-cons in America are against the war in Iraq these days! This is not divorced from the fight for Higher Education, it is totally related, and money spent on war could be better used for HE, FE, schools and the NHS. It is also about the type of society we want to live in one that values war or one that values education, learning and knowledge. This is why UCU Left is supporting Roger Kline for General Secretary of UCU.

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