

What is the Point of Regions?

A Discussion Paper for Regional Secretaries Meeting- January 13th 2007

Introduction

This is a brief paper that attempts to flesh out reasons why a regional structure fully integrated into the constitution of UCU with a clear constitutional role is important. It considers three issues:

1. The current position and the potential state of the union without an effective regional organisation
2. The institutional, promotional and political value of regions
3. Past problems with Natfhe and/or AUT regional structures (and reasonable objections to their resuscitation)
4. The potential constitutional role and powers of an effective region
5. How an enhanced and clear constitutional role for regions can be achieved quickly

1. The Current Position

'Regions' survive into the new union but in a highly altered and much reduced format. Under UCU rules regions are barely mentioned. Regions have no constitutional role and will **not** do the following.

1. Elect delegates to conference, sector conference or special sector conference and will have no combined power to call the latter.
2. Will have no constitutional role in submission of motions and/or amendments to conference
3. Will have no role in the election of NEC members (the boundaries and process for election of NEC members (either sector) is entirely unrelated to regional boundaries and/or regional meetings.
4. Expressly will not act **in any way** as an intermediary body between branches/local associations and/or the national executive.
5. Formally cannot hold to account either officers or officials of the union or require/receive reports from either (note geographical boundaries for NEC elections are not necessarily coincidental to that of former Natfhe regional structures or of operational locations of UCU officials)
6. Formally hold plenary sessions to ensure unity of views, purpose and action across the FE and HE sectors
7. Formally draw up links with other union organisations or political groups in UK or beyond
8. Formally hold financial assets of the union

Why does this matter?

Accountability of union to members – The complexity of the election of the first NEC illustrates the problem. Some NEC members will be elected nationally, some for specific role and some on the basis of regional constitutionally that are neither necessarily coincident with ex-Natfhe regions nor with the working locations of UCU officials and/or offices. This will certainly have a knock on impact in terms of the ability of elected members to represent members and be accountable to them. Without any express constitutional requirement to attend regional meetings or send/submit individual reports to regions, it is difficult to see how beyond branch/local association level an NEC member can be expected to have more than an

anecdotal relationship with the generality of UCU membership, even less is it clear how that NEC member can have a sense of general post-16 issues (as opposed to sector issues). It is not possible to argue that political group allegiance, academic subject based links or the 'activists' email supply substitute mechanisms even at an informal level.

What may be more likely to be the case is that increasingly the NEC will become distanced and invisible to the generality of members except where an NEC individual member happens to be located in a particular college or university. Even in that context, **the NEC collectively or individually have no obligation to engage branches/local associations** or individual members regarding union policy and/or other issues. A good NEC member may well do so, but the lack of formal channels to achieve this communication and ongoing relationship will be a problem even for the most conscientious individual.

At a collective level there does not even seem to be a mechanism for the NEC to send all minutes of meetings to regions or to anyone else. Nor, aside from raising questions direct to the UCU President, do channels exist for influencing the content of agendas etc. In that light the absence of a UCU equivalent of the Higher//Further Education Action Committees (directly nominated from regions under NATFHE) worsens the situation. Likewise the opacity and virtual impossibility of constitutional mechanisms to call Special Sector Conferences other than via the NEC and national officers/officials is a considerable retreat on what existed under the NATFHE constitution.

Crudely an NEC and/or an NEC member could effectively do absolutely nothing for her/his period of office (2 years) without any need to answer to anyone except possibly through the annual election process itself or through the national conference. These are not mechanisms designed in the first instance to serve these purposes and are unlikely to impose even the vestige of discipline or accountability.

Of course because regions formally did not exist in the AUT and, arguably, are not clearly or at least expressly, paralleled inside other unions, 'accountability' concerns can be discounted as over-inflated and/or not coincident with union ethos. 'Trust us/me' seems to be the watchword of at least some of the advocates of the current state of play in UCU. Words such as 'transparency' or 'accountability' are condemned as non-union or are treated as pure rhetoric. Those who genuinely believe in the 'trust me' model can probably only be combated by example, but the examples of the recent debacles over the 2005 FE and HE pay campaigns are probably example enough.

Action and Effectiveness of UCU:

Without regular and constitutionally empowered regional meetings there may be a considerable reduction in the forums for lay members to engage directly in union activities and in particular to consider and create union policy and develop union campaigns. A national conference happens annually. Regional Conferences will take place at least 4/5 times per year. Regional Conferences

are reasonably accessible to the vast majority of members. An annual national conference is not (motions passed at ANC are regularly 'lost' by even the best union national offices). Nor is it easy or financially viable for a union to hold many 'one off' centralised events, meetings or forums or to publicise these. Can email alone provide effective debating forum/ communications to substitute for regular meetings? The answer is almost certainly 'no'. Email correspondence can supplement union structures, but cannot substitute for them.

Again those who are only partially convinced of the need for regions in UCU may well combat the above by stating that what is preserved into the UCU structures of Natfhe regions can serve all the above purposes and that there is therefore no reason for UCU regions to have enhanced constitutional powers. The problem it seems to me with this type of argument is that reducing regions to the role of glorified 'focus group' and/or 'information dissemination' exercise will not encourage attendance. Individuals and groups attend and nominate delegates to attend meetings that can actually achieve things. UCU Regions can far better achieve things (e.g. initiate and develop popular campaigns), if they are wired into a constitutional framework that can at least facilitate this process. In practical terms this means that members of the NEC and at least local union officials need to be required to be in attendance and mandated to take forward such campaigns. If national union policy and action can be shown to be generated by 'branch motion' to regional committee' to 'NEC' leading to discernable campaign, that will illustrate all the best reasons for more members to become actively involved in UCU.

Another argument against the above is that well-organised local associations and branches can achieve much that is stated above, are work-based and are more closely tied to actual member need than dispersed regions. This is a reasonable argument and certainly has force in areas where ex-AUT local associations are thin on the ground, for example 'northern' region where there was only sizeable AUT membership in Durham and Newcastle University.

Nor can we say that the argument might not have some force as criticism of ex-Natfhe. Ask the average ex-Natfhe member at times, what the role of regions was and she/he might well be somewhat exercised! It is true that at times the function of regions were somewhat obscure (see 3).

However, against this, it can be argued and shown that regional and work-based representation works are at their most effective when working together. **How can that be achieved except with regional organisations that themselves own effective powers (not exclusive powers) to representative combined interests. These regional powers do not have to be held at the expense of the local association. Again, the clash between region and work-based representations is misplaced when polarised.**

For institutionally based representatives to be and feel effective, they need region structures to address, widen and make concrete at regional and national level through policy and union action. Likewise a region must be

reflective of a maximum number of members' concerns to justify a constitutional role within UCU. This is not some kind of utopia. It has been achieved and can be again. However, it does require that regional bodies have national power to take forward branch based concerns, alongside the ability of branches to take those interests direct to national bodies.

Let's ask what is the real agenda of those who taking into account the above, remain opposed to constitutionally enhanced regions? From some political perspectives, centralised structures are more easily controlled from both left and right perspectives. 'Top down' union managements can always claim two things, potentially, the possibility of direct appeal to the wider membership (over and around the 'activists) and, second, as a result of direct appeal the ability to act with speed on the basis of the perceived 'collective'. Again it is easy to see all of this at work in the 2006 national disputes. From the point of view of those who really believe in a 'members' led union, it is not what we want. It frequently leads to the least aware and least active members making judgement on the basis of the most partial information by the most 'political' and 'self-interested' factions in unions.

Finally one argument, usually most advanced by the left against regions holding enduring constitutional and decision-making powers. It is argued that at times of industrial and/or political conflict spontaneous groupings will emerge that permit collective industrial action and that standing committees such as regions can be used to block any effective industrial action. True they can. All structures are contingent to some degree on politics but this type of argument is best combated on its own terms by example. Obvious reference again can be made to the 2006 national disputes. Who blocked what? When regions are in the position to block anything that is the time to argue that they might become haven for bureaucrats!

2. The institutional, promotional and political value of regions

Under the present UCU structures the following can take place:

Regular meetings included in UCU calendar – at least four per year – allowing liaison between sector colleagues and between the sectors.

Liaison with other Trades Union and TUC bodies, for example in London Region through SERTUC and Trades Councils

Suggest common policy to branch committees – essentially reversing the process of policy creation and transmission as current in Natfhe

Communicate information and generate collective response regarding industrial and educational issues throughout the area

Co-ordinate national campaigns at regional level (hence the London Action Committee HE 2005-6)

Provide a context for reports and meetings between full-time officials and lay members

Generate common positions between FE and HE on post-16 issues

Regional Conferences can request the presence of union officers/officials.

Democratic union officials and NEC members will want and **should want** to attend these meetings.

In FE and also in certain cases in HE, regional borders parallel educational administrative boundaries; employers know this. Regional officials in FE use regional consent as an ingredient in bargaining tactics when arguing for stronger deals with individual managements.

All of this is good, but it is not enough to draw up lists of what regions can potentially do. If regions simply pass motions and engage in actions that can simply be ignored by national officers and officials. There are currently no formal structures even for regional officers to meet together to take forward anything at national level or formally to take forward campaigns locally. For this reason a wish list is set out under '4'. But, and this is a significant 'but', if '4' is to be achieved, then some realistic re-evaluation of the effectiveness of regions has to be engaged with.

3. Past problems with Natfhe and/or AUT regional structures (and reasonable objections to their resuscitation)

Insufficiently representative:

Sometimes dominated, or giving the appearance of dominance, by political factions/fiefdoms

Sometimes too introspective

Sometimes too ideological

Sometimes too concerned with external campaign over internal actions

Sometimes used as the hobbyhorse of individual activists.

Could sometimes generate policy/action plans that had very little chance of being realised

Sometimes unrepresentative of members interests, were all regional delegates really elected by quorate branch meetings?

Sometimes NEC members were reluctant to turn up

Sometimes regional powers that did exist (for example the ability to call Special Sector Conferences were hard to exercise

Sometimes regional meetings were incapable of follow up

All of the above has been claimed of regions. Even in the best of situations UCU regions are likely to be subject to these criticisms, but in order to combat some points made above, we can put mechanisms in place that at least in theory make such criticism less potent. In particular we could introduce as a requirement in advance of any regional meeting that delegates circulate branch issues by email across the region and that, conversely, timely regional minutes/reports/motions are circulated to branches. Some rule could be written into regional constitutions. Likewise a regional newsletter, or a slot in the UCU national literature, could help make regional business far more relevant and representative of members' interests.

**4. The future role, structures/elections and business of regions:
This is a minimalist set of suggestions compiled originally by London
Region.**

- UCU regional entities should be controlled by the lay membership with elected officers of Chair; Secretary; Treasurer; Fixed-term/hourly-paid representative; Academic related staff representative; and Equalities officer.
- Each region to have FE and HE sectoral committees and a combined cross sector committee.
- Regional representatives to be elected from branches/associations.
- The status of regions to be clear in the UCU constitution with regions having a role in policy co-ordination.
- Regions to be able to send motions to national congress, in addition to branches/associations.
- Regions to be able to send some delegates direct to national congress
- Regions to be able to request presence of NEC representatives and request minutes from the NEC (the NEC agenda should include a standing item for regional issues to be raised
- Regions should have a role in calling special sector conferences
- For elections of regional representatives from branches/associations there should be a divisor of 2 reps for the first 100 members and 1 further rep for each subsequent one hundred members or part thereof.
- The policy co-ordination role of regions was emphasised as a response to and bulwark against co-operation between employers

5. How an enhanced and clear constitutional role for regions can be achieved quickly –

This is the hardest part of this paper. Obviously, the only real mechanism is by rule change agreed at national congress. Is it possible to use the existing regional structure to co-ordinate branch/LA motions such that at least some of what is suggested under '4' is achieved in 2007?

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