

FIGHT FOR EDUCATION, JOBS AND AGAINST A PAY CUT

Pivotal decision of the HEC leaves the UCU without an HE national strategy

On 9 October the Higher Education Committee (HEC) of the UCU decided by 16 votes to 15 (with two abstentions) that there would not be a ballot of members in 2009 over the employers' final offer of 0.5% and their refusal to negotiate a national agreement on the avoidance of redundancies.

This decision has profound ramifications for everyone in HE, whether a UCU member or not, and whether an academic member of staff or not.

The HEC divided between those on the 'left', who thought that it was the job of the Committee to offer a lead to members in this very difficult situation, and those on the 'right', who were keen to avoid any concerted national industrial action this year.

Those in favour of putting the issue to the membership included the UCU Left on the HEC, along with a similar number of others on the HEC. All members of the UCU, on whichever side of this debate they find themselves, need to be aware of these divisions, and of the arguments that underpin them.

Rejection of the employers' final offer

All sides recognised that the Ucea offer of 0.5% was a provocation, and an attempt to take advantage of the economic situation in order to roll back the small improvements in pay achieved by the 2006 dispute.

The three-year settlement, 2006-09, had achieved salary increases for all in HE that were marginally greater than the rate of inflation over the three-year period. A 0.5% increase for 2009-10, in a year when inflation (RPI) is expected to be 2.5%, will represent, however, a 2% reduction in real incomes, and more than wipe out the gains of 2006.

This is why the HEC



A protest in support of the Tower Hamlets College strike

overwhelmingly (all members bar one) rejected the proposal of one member that we should accept the offer.

A 0.5% pay settlement for 2009-10 would also mean that staff in Higher Education were currently going to get the lowest settlement in the public sector. School teachers have just accepted 4.6% over two years (2.3% pa), and our fraternal colleagues in FE are currently balloting over action to reject a 1.5% offer.

Redundancies and cuts in HE provision

Across the country, members face an avalanche of proposed redundancies, now afflicting almost all HE institutions. In a few cases, these arise from financial difficulties confronting the institutions.

In most cases, however, they represent either a desire by senior managements or governors to concentrate activity on more lucrative areas of provision (via RAE or other funding indicators), or a decision not to cross-subsidize areas of work whose 'cost centres' run deficits. In these latter cases, the very idea of a university is being challenged.

Decisions about the ambit of a university's provision, made on such bases, are not being based on educational or scholarly criteria.

They are being led by a market that is itself distorted by the educational and political prejudices of the Government and its HE ministers.

Apart from the educational consequences, these decisions also represent an assault on employment stability for UCU members.

That is why the UCU, in conjunction with the other unions in HE, was pressing the demand that Ucea negotiate a redundancy avoidance agreement as part of national negotiations. The Ucea categorically refused, arguing that this was not part of its remit from the individual university employers.

This was a direct challenge to the UCU on whether it would be able to protect members' jobs with a national campaign and dispute rather than through a series of potentially isolated local campaigns whose outcome would depend on contingent local factors.

The debate

There was an extended argument on the HEC. However, good-natured the conduct of this disagreement was, it revealed the profound differences that divide the Committee. The HEC has made a serious error, that, if left unchallenged, will have far-reaching implications for both local and national bargaining.

Those on the Right, while wanting to reject the offer (apart from one amongst them who proposed acceptance of the 0.5%), were unwilling to campaign amongst the membership for a 'yes' vote for action to fight for a national agreement on avoidance of redundancy, and for a pay settlement at least in line with inflation.

Those on the 'left' of the HEC (the UCU Left plus others) argued that Ucea had thrown down the gauntlet at the feet of the UCU. Either we picked it up, and faced the test of winning the majority of members for industrial action in defence of education, jobs and no pay cut (with the risk that we might fail), or that we walked away from a fight on these three questions.

To do the latter would be a complete surrender of the field. It could have devastating consequences in terms of the union's negotiating position nationally and locally.

The consultation exercise

Those on the Left also pointed out the inadequacy of the recent 'members consultation'. This had been organized to be in the first week of the new academic year.

It had been the Right at the previous HEC in July which had voted by majority to prevent campaign meetings from taking place on campuses during the summer in the run-up to the consultation.

The consequence of this was that there had been, in effect, no campaign among the membership prior to the consultation meetings to inform them of the circumstances and the implications of not fighting this round. This was, therefore, a completely inadequate exercise as a measure of members' willingness to fight.

It was clear that, in those places where local branch officers had argued forcefully for the need for a campaign of industrial action this year, the straw poll results from the members or the votes in branch meetings had been in favour of balloting for action (Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Brighton, etc.).

The Left argued that the issue of the 0.5% pay offer could not be separated from the fight for education and for jobs.

Although the Right argued that members were more concerned about jobs and the preservation of courses than pay, a trade-off between the two was not being offered by the employers.

If there was going to be resistance from the UCU then it had to be focused on educational provision and resistance to redundancies but would also have to address the question of pay, and seek a settlement at least in line with inflation.

What can be done now?

The first step is to recognise that the struggle over jobs and provision is being forced on us by the employers in any event.

At Westminster, at Leeds, at London Met, and across the country, the employers' offensive is in full swing. Branch after branch is now being forced to consider a local ballot for industrial action to prevent compulsory redundancies.

A national struggle is emerging in a piecemeal fashion with the risk that some branches will be isolated and defeated, and that the different branches will have to go into the fight for jobs separately and at different times.

In these circumstances, there are three things that we need to do:-

1. We need to pass a motion (see below) that seeks to commit the union to full support for all local struggles for education and against job losses, and to generalize this into a public and popular campaign for education in the recession, with a national demonstration this term, and a lobby of Parliament in the new year.

2. We need to gather the necessary support from branches for a special recall national delegate conference (a Special Higher Education Sector Conference, or SHESC), and ensure that all HE branches have a campaign among their members to explain prior to their meetings what is at stake in this decision before electing delegates.

The central issue that this conference needs to confront is whether and when to ballot the membership on the defence of education and jobs, and in resisting a pay cut this year.

3. We need to register the importance of elections to the NEC. The choice of which candidate you vote for in these elections makes a crucial difference in these questions that are of such pivotal importance to the lives and the livelihoods of all members.

We must urge all members to consider the election manifestos carefully, and urge them to vote for UCU Left candidates, or for those otherwise on the left who are in favour of offering a lead to our members on these questions.

Pass the motion on the right and send it to the NEC and to the HEC.

Get your branch committee, branch or local association to call for a SHESC before the end of this term.

Model motion

Motion for submission to the HEC & NEC

This LA/Branch:

● Declares its full support for the joint union campaign to defend Higher Education;

● Condemns redundancies, cuts in HE provision and denial of educational opportunities to students;

● Resolves to support all UCU branches resisting redundancies;

● Resolves to engage in or support local negotiations to improve institutional agreements on job security, redundancy consultation and redeployment, and appropriate workload models to ensure that the burden of any job losses do not add pressure to remaining staff;

● Resolves to ballot for local industrial action, or urges branches to so ballot, in response to any threat of compulsory redundancies;

● Calls upon HEC to wage a vigorous and resolute struggle to defend Higher Education, jobs, conditions of service and pay levels;

● Urges the NEC to support all joint union, and/or cross-sectoral initiatives to protest at cuts and redundancies, including a national demonstration in the autumn, and a lobby of Parliament to celebrate post-16 education, and to urge proper funding for Universities and Colleges in the spring.

● The LA/branch, noting the wave of cuts and redundancies being announced at local level, and the growing number of branches balloting for local industrial action in response, believes that a national strategy is needed to unite these local struggles, and to prevent them from being isolated, or weakened by local factors.

● In order to determine an appropriate national strategy, this branch believes that a Special HE Sector Conference should meet this term, after branches have considered the situation confronting the sector.

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