

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INTERIM REPORT ON THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL SITUATION

1. THE HE SECTOR CONFERENCE (11 FEBRUARY 2010)

The HE Sector conference on the pay claim concluded with two clear messages:

- there is no trade-off between jobs and pay;
- the UCU will lead a national fight this academic year to preserve the integrity of our universities and the jobs of our members and that fight will continue as part of next year's pay campaign.

JOBS AND PAY

The Conference debate was in two parts (see the UCU website for the full details of motions and amendments passed): a debate on the nature of the pay claim to be submitted for next year, and a debate over the nature of the campaign to be launched this year. In the pay debate, the Conference overwhelmingly rejected a proposal that UCU turn its back on joint negotiations with the other unions in order to 'go it alone'.

It then made clear that defence of jobs and educational provision had to be considered as central to any negotiation of next year's pay claim. The UCU was not and should not be fighting only over salaries when the nature of universities (in terms of the breadth of their provision), and of the HE sector (in terms of its unified character) were under threat. Such a trade-off was not, in any event, on offer from UCEA or individual universities. This year the employers had imposed a 0.5% increase, and were simultaneously in the process of imposing serious cuts in jobs and provision.

CAMPAIGNING FOR EDUCATION

The Conference then debated how the UCU should be campaigning over jobs, education and pay during the coming period. The pivotal debate was over whether the union should be resisting redundancies and course closures purely in local struggles, or on a national basis as well.

The complication is that UCEA refuses to negotiate on jobs and provision nationally on the grounds that its subscriber institutions have not sanctioned such negotiations. Clearly the employers hope to face down local resistance, and to use salami tactics to push through the cuts. If they can defeat the UCU and the other unions in one institution then that will be an encouragement to other managements to hold firm against the opposition of staff and students.

Those delegations at the Conference which were in favour of a national fight against the cuts argued that we had to combine local action with a national response. We should maximize local resistance through both local campaigns and industrial action; wherever closures and redundancies were announced branches need to follow the example set by Leeds UCU in their robust opposition to the cuts. We also needed, it was argued, to coordinate those struggles regionally and nationally.

More than that, we had to campaign, delegates observed, throughout the union to ensure that every member in HE was aware that their courses and jobs were also on the line even if there were no redundancies yet announced in

their own universities. Those threats of closure and job losses might well come to them too. If they were going to be resisted successfully then they needed to be resisted jointly by all branches. And that meant demanding that UCEA negotiate nationally and then, if its subscriber institutions refused to do so, balloting for industrial action this academic year. That struggle needed then to carry over into next year, if necessary.

A few delegates argued against a national campaign to defend jobs this year - one of those that did insisted that our predecessor unions had warded off worse cuts in the 1980s through sustained local struggles, suggesting that the same strategy could succeed again.

When the Conference divided on the question, however (voting on an amendment to prepare for coordinated national strike action this year to defend jobs), the arguments for national action carried the day overwhelmingly, by at least a 2/3 majority. The motion on campaigning, thus amended, was then carried nem con, with only 6 abstentions.

2. WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

At the HE Committee that met the morning after the Conference, it was agreed that the General Secretary would write to all VCs (and Wardens) to ask them to indicate whether they will agree to be represented by UCEA in national negotiations over the preservation of provision and of jobs in the face of the cuts. Meanwhile, discussions will proceed this month with the other unions in the sector to seek both a common pay claim for next year, and a common position on fighting job losses and course closures this year. The demand for national negotiations for the avoidance of redundancies and the preservation of provision will be presented to the Joint National Committee for the Higher Education Sector (JNCHES), where the unions meet UCEA, in March.

Here at Goldsmiths

Other universities are now facing serious cuts. At Sussex, balloting is under way for industrial action to resist over 100 redundancies and a range of course closures. At Leeds, UCU members voted overwhelmingly for strike action while at Kings, UCL, Westminster and elsewhere, preparations are being made for ballots for industrial action.

At Goldsmiths, by contrast, there are, according to the Warden, 'no current plans for compulsory redundancies', nor, as far as we are aware, of course closures. The management believes that it can ride out the first effects of funding reductions for 2010/11 through the imposition of 2.5% cuts across the board.

It is impossible to predict what future Budgets and future governments will impose on HE but, in the long run, it is far less likely that benign peace will last. Next year's cuts, whichever party wins the forthcoming election, will put immense strain on those commitments; and the longer term prospects for public sector provision look severely straitened. Our Union's strength lies in its ability to represent the profession as a whole, protecting education and its provision as a national priority. If other UCU branches are defeated in their opposition to substantial job losses, it will make the defence of education and jobs more difficult at Goldsmiths. That is why your delegates at the HESC voted for a national fightback. We also need to ensure that an already over-stretched and highly stressed staff does not allow itself to be driven into illness by accepting any cuts that would increase workloads and negatively affect the student experience.

3. BUILDING THE CAMPAIGN

In every institution facing cuts, closures and redundancies, every effort must be made to build a joint campaign with the other campus unions, and with the local students' unions.

Open Meetings

In addition to the necessary UCU meetings, the UCU at Goldsmiths will continue to organize open meetings with Unison and the SU for all staff and students in order to explain the consequences of the cuts nationally and what we might do to resist them.

Solidarity

The list of universities in dispute and on strike is likely to get very long before the end of the year. It looked as if colleagues at Leeds were going to be first in line but, after a massive turnout in their ballot for industrial action, where a record majority for strike action was won, management at Leeds quickly backed down and rescinded any immediate plans for compulsory redundancies.

Whatever happens at Leeds, there is likely to be action in other institutions, for example Sussex, UCL, Kings, Westminster. In this situation, the sustenance of the members on strike becomes pivotal. We need financial solidarity from every member. We cannot allow the management at any institution to starve our members back to work. Every UCU branch (and especially those like ours where redundancies are not currently planned) should, therefore, discuss arrangements for levying members to contribute to UCU's national Fighting Fund.

London demonstration

The London Region of the UCU, embracing has called a demonstration in defence of Higher Education on Saturday the 20th March. Colleagues should put that date in their diaries and bring friends and family to the protest.

BALLOT AFTER JNCHES IN MARCH

The crucial question, however, is what happens after the JNCHES meeting in March. If the employers refuse to allow UCEA to negotiate nationally, and if these negotiations do not yield an immediate commitment to course provision and no compulsory redundancies, then we will be balloting for national industrial action. That action can commence at the high point of the summer term, with a massive demonstration of opposition to the cuts in HE through one-day strikes, and continuing action short of a strike.

Success in that ballot, however, requires the active involvement of a wide layer of members in campaigning over the next months, and a clear understanding of all members of what is at stake – not just their salaries and jobs, and not just their workloads and the quality of their working and non-working lives, but the future of the HE sector, and the future prospects of generations of potential students.

GUCU Executive, February 2010

emergency general meeting

**4 March 1PM RHB 307
the latest on HE cuts
speaker from
Leeds University**