

UK: Bureaucrats walk out of University and College Union congress

By Alice Summers
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The University and College Union (UCU) annual congress further underscored the pro-employer and anti-democratic nature of the trade unions.

The Congress in Manchester, held from May 30 to June 1, was the first since the union sold out 50,000 lecturers, librarians, administration staff and technicians who had engaged in a 14-day strike to defend their pensions and working conditions.

In response to a motion to amend the democratic framework of the union, as well as two motions relating to the conduct of the UCU leadership during the strikes, union leader Sally Hunt walked out of the congress with her supporters among UCU administrative staff—organised in Unite the Union—on three separate occasions.

Such was the refusal of the bureaucracy to accept any criticism, or be held accountable in any way, that the UCU Congress was forced to end early.

In February and March, Higher Education (HE) staff at 65 different institutions across the UK brought many universities to a standstill during 14 days of industrial action spread over four weeks, constituting the largest-ever strike held at UK HE institutions. This was in opposition to plans to cut lecturers' pensions by around 40 percent, with the average lecturer losing around £10,000 a year during their retirement.

The UCU leadership—in collaboration with the Universities UK (UUK) employment body—sought to shut down the strike from the outset. On March 12, after nine days of strikes, UCU and UUK reached a sell-out agreement that would have resulted in the loss by lecturers of an average 19 percent in the value of their pensions.

A mass rebellion broke out among lecturers against this, and the following day thousands of UCU members met in universities nationally to oppose the sell-out deal being proposed. Hundreds surrounded UCU's London headquarters and demanded that the agreement endorsed by the union be repudiated, leaving the UCU leadership with no choice but to reject the rotten deal it had agreed just hours earlier.

However, determined to complete its betrayal, just two weeks later UCU proposed a second shoddy deal that it eventually rammed through on April 13, with UCU members voting, with reluctance, to accept the UUK deal by a 64 percent to 36 percent majority. While the UCU leadership claimed to have extracted concessions from UUK, the deal left lecturers in virtually the same position in which they had started. Management only committed to convening a “Joint Expert Panel, comprised of actuarial and academic experts nominated in equal numbers from both sides,” to “deliver a report” on the valuation of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS).

The agreement reached by UCU stated that current contributions and benefits from the USS could continue for members, but only for another year—“until at least April 2019.” After that, management would be able to put in place mechanisms to end the Defined Benefits system and move to an inferior Defined Contributions plan.

Although 32 of the 35 UCU branches that announced their vote either rejected the UUK offer or demanded that it be revised to include guarantees protecting pensions with no detriment, the UCU Higher Education Committee made the decision to put the deal to an e-ballot with no revisions. This anti-democratic measure was aimed at isolating HE staff, who were then subject to a battery of UCU propaganda insisting no better offer would be forthcoming.

In the wake of the vote, the UCU Left—which is dominated by members of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—made token criticisms of the union, declaring that the e-ballot exposed “a deep democratic deficit in our trade union,” and proclaimed, “We need democratic structures and a democratic culture that properly reflects our transformed union.”

As for Hunt—who played a key role in forcing through the sell-out deal—the UCU Left declared following the “yes” vote that “[we] have no desire to personalise the issue but she must publicly affirm that [future] negotiations must go through the proper channels. And if she is not prepared to carry out UCU policy then she should stand down

altogether.”

These issues were the focus of the motions the UCU Left and their supporters put at last week’s congress.

Motions to amend the democratic framework of the union, as well as two motions relating to the conduct of the UCU leadership during the strikes, were put forward to be discussed on the first day of the congress. The first of the two motions regarding leadership was a motion of no confidence calling for the resignation of Hunt over her handling of the lecturers’ strike, with the second calling for her to be censured for her actions.

In response to these motions, Hunt and members of the UCU administrative staff, organised in Unite, organised a series of provocative walkouts. The first related to the motion put forward by Bath and Sheffield UCU branches to amend the democratic structures of the union. Hunt and the administrative staff walked out after claiming that this motion negatively impacted union staff, due to its reference to the number of elected officials and to mechanisms for holding elected representatives to account.

A further motion from the chair to withdraw the motions of criticism was defeated on the second day of the congress by 144 votes to 123. Hunt and the Unite officials claimed that the motions “went against their employment terms and conditions” by naming a member of staff (Hunt) and criticising her publicly—rather than using the official complaints procedure—leading to the second walkout. After an emergency national executive committee meeting that evening failed to resolve the disagreement, Hunt and the Unite members left the congress early again on the third day.

The motions criticised the union leadership for having put the second UUK offer to a ballot of members without having taken a vote of branches first, as well as accusing UCU’s leadership of a “continuous pattern of unilateral, undemocratic action,” and arguing that the union should “pressurise employers to accept the will of members, not the other way around.”

While UCU members criticised the union’s role in suppressing the strikes, Hunt declared the sell-out agreement to be a great success! UUK had been forced to withdraw the “disastrous proposals” to end the Defined Benefits section of the USS, stated Hunt, because “when we work together we are very hard to beat.” In her speech to the congress, Hunt claimed the strike a success because “at key moments we all saw the value of unity,” with the “gains [UCU] have made this year [being] directly related to the unity we showed last year.”

Decrying the “factionalism” of those criticising the union’s policies, Hunt insisted that the union must band together—i.e., that members must submit to UCU’s

pro-employer dirty deals and keep their mouths shut. Hunt also effectively called for the purging of dissenting voices from the union’s national executive committee—of which the UCU Left makes up a significant proportion—calling for the 68-member committee to be significantly reduced in size.

These walkouts and the comments made by Hunt reveal the deeply anti-democratic and pro-employer nature of the UCU. Any attempt—mild as it may be—to challenge the anti-worker stance of the bureaucracy cannot be tolerated.

This is not merely a result of a lack of “democratic structures” within the union or the personal failings of Hunt but is the logical outcome of the nature of the trade unions themselves—which function as an industrial police force on behalf of the government and employers—and are not amenable to be reformed as fighting organisations. The bureaucracy’s ability to increase the exploitation of their members through declining wages, the erosion of pensions and other social rights, and to facilitate their own lucrative positions, requires the suppression of the democratic rights of the membership.

While criticisms of the anti-democratic character of the UCU union are entirely legitimate, the perspective of the UCU Left in calling for a few cosmetic changes at the top is bankrupt. Rather than waging a struggle against the efforts of the union to sabotage the strike, the UCU Left instead seeks to persuade educational staff that the union remains a fighting organisation, and in doing so to channel opposition to UCU’s policies back into the union itself.

The defence of workers’ jobs, conditions and living standards cannot be entrusted to the unions, but must be fought for by the workers themselves, independently of unions, through the establishment of rank-and-file workplace committees. This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party.

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