

Report UCU Congress, Manchester, 8-10 June 2012

KCL UCU delegates: Melanie Cooke, Joel Dunn, Meg Maguire, Jim Wolfreys (NEC)

Details of congress including motions are available at
<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5860>

Congress was well attended this year with many “first-time” delegates representing branches who had previously been under represented or not at all. There was serious discussion on the challenges our members face, from attacks from local management to changes imposed on the sector by the government, and how our union should respond most effectively.

There was united criticism of the government’s austerity agenda and its negative impact on staff and students in education. Delegates from many UCU branches reported the impacts of increasing workloads and staff cuts; the introduction of performance management schemes and the use of the Research Excellence Framework as a tool to make staff redundant; the use of outsourcing and privatisation as a means to driving down pay, conditions and deprofessionalising and dividing the workforce; the use of casualized contracts, including post-graduate students or post-doctoral researchers and cheap alternatives to lecturing positions.

The debate on the USS pension scheme among representatives from pre-92 institutions drew considered arguments from both sides over whether to end the suspension of the dispute. However, it became increasingly clear throughout that although industrial action, including work-to-contract, last Autumn, had brought the employers back to the table, since then negotiations had not resulted in adequate gains, i.e. a scheme no worse than the Teacher’s Pension Scheme (TPS). Congress voted to reinstate the work-to-contract action and to campaign for action during the Autumn. Colleagues in TPS the also debated their action, with overwhelming support to build for action alongside sister unions, including the NUT and NASUWT, in the Autumn.

There was also an intelligent and animated debate over the democratic structures in the union. One proposal was to reduce the number of members on the NEC and spend the money which it is proposed this will save on casework for individual members. However, Congress voted that the national executive committee structure should be decided by the collective needs of the union so that all strands of our membership, including disability and equality groups, are represented; this is less likely to be the case if numbers on the NEC and other committees are drastically reduced. No speakers objected to the principle of giving more support to caseworkers (most delegates are likely to provide local support for members) but, it was made clear, and agreed, that our union cannot casework its way out of the crisis in education brought upon it by government policy or local management.

A commission will be elected by delegates to establish the best structure for the NEC. There was also criticism, both from academic and democratic standpoints, of the wide use of plebiscites or “consultative ballots” to formulate union policy. Such surveys can be useful but without an informed debate the results can easily be led by the choice of question: “whoever writes the survey gets the result they want”. There was widespread concern about the validity of the surveys hitherto conducted. A number of speakers suggested that in future they should conform to basic academic standards.

In summary, the mood of congress was serious but positive. The issues raised by delegates from their local branches symbolised trends across our sector making our jobs harder, more stressful, and restricting them to a narrow view of education. Our union needs to be able to fight to defend jobs of our members and to stand-up for education as a whole, but it needs to do this where we are strongest, emphasising the collective rather than the individual, increasing the engagement of members in collective action, as a united union, and part of the struggle with our colleagues in the trade union movement.