

# Broadcast

Bulletin of the UCU Independent Broad Left

UCU  
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## Time of danger, Time of opportunity

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**OK** - So it is probably a myth that the Chinese word for 'crisis' is a combination of the words for 'danger' and 'opportunity'. But today we certainly have a government in crisis, and that means both dangers and opportunities for the trade union movement, UCU included.

Dangers, because the Trade Union Act, despite all the amendments in the House of Lords, still represents a vicious piece of anti-union legislation, designed to make effective industrial action near impossible.

Dangers also for UCU members in FE, because of the area reviews and mergers being rolled out. And dangers for HE members in England, through the soon-to-be-published HE Bill, following on from the Green Paper and White Paper, both of which propose opening up the sector to private providers, and linking student fees to 'teaching excellence'.

But there are opportunities too, because the government is in crisis. It's not just the increasingly histrionic debate over EU membership. It's also the dearth of new 'big ideas' in the recent Queen's Speech, and the number of concessions that the government has had to make, including:

- accepting the majority of the Lords' amendments to the TU Bill, especially the review of electronic balloting.
- Jeremy Hunt being forced to negotiate again with the BMA, whatever the junior doctors ultimately think of the proposed settlement.
- George Osborne's withdrawal of the planned changes to disability benefits.
- David Cameron's promise to exclude the NHS from the EU-US Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

All these, and more, show that the government is weak. That means opportunities for the TU movement, but only by overcoming the dangers.

## OPINION PIECE

*by Joanna de Groot*

The next twelve months are going to be pretty demanding for UCU members - so nothing new there then !?!?

Colleagues in FE face massive shifts in their sector as 're-organisation' and amalgamation impact on their working lives. Huge cuts to funding, redundancies, increasing curriculum delivery by non-lecturing staff etc are causing untold damage to the sector. Colleagues in HE will be up against the effects of the government's White Paper which proposes to subject them (1) to an inappropriate and burdensome regime of so-called 'teaching quality assessment' and (2) to destructive competition with new shoddy privatised institutions. Quite apart from making unnecessary problems for staff, these changes are seriously damaging to the learning and experience of our students which the government alleges are its main concern.

UCU has always stood up for the best interests of post-school education, and for the needs and con-

cerns of students and the families who support them. We work with students to ensure that they get the most out of their studies, and our anger at what is happening to post school education is for them as well as ourselves. This applies to our resistance to excessive workloads, to poor pay, to casualisation, and to management mistreatment of staff, as well as to the so-called 'reforms' just mentioned. Bad terms and conditions for staff = bad student experience.

Dealing with these massive difficulties can seem like a very uphill task and in my view we can only tackle it by working together. Only by involving the membership generally can we create real pressure for the changes we want to see in post-school education. Congress and sector conferences can set policies, but it is how those are implemented which is crucial. When our UK committees, our branch officers, our activists and all our members understand and support each other we gain the strength to make changes. Our goal for the coming year should be to make that happen, and I shall be doing my very best to contribute to that work.

*Joanna de Groot is UCU incoming President Elect*

## CONGRESS DAY I

**Congress has the opportunity to present a united face to the government and the employers, since there will be broad agreement over many of the issues raised in the motions and amendments.**

The first debate, over what is now the **Trade Union Act**, includes two motions submitted while the Bill was still before Parliament, and a third, from the NEC, submitted just after the Bill gained the Royal Assent. All of these should be fully supported. The NEC's motion (No 2) seeks to assist in the process of creating the conditions for unified mass industrial action to defeat the Act. A key coordinating role there can be played by local trades union councils, to which all branches should affiliate.

The next debate area, on **European and international work**, emphasises, firstly, the need for a global response to privatisation and marketisation of education, particularly over TTIP, and secondly, the need to defend international staff and students in Britain.

The **International solidarity** debate area includes

important motions and amendments on Turkey, the murder of Giulio Regeni in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, refugees and standing up to racism, Islamophobia, anti-semitism and fascism. The only contentious issues are in motion 9, where the NEC has submitted two amendments. The first of these reflects legal advice that a blanket boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions would be unlawful. We may not like it, but that is the case. The second addresses what is a veiled attack on the general secretary for participating, as a TUC general council member, in meetings with Israeli trade union federation Histadrut on a visit to Israel and Palestine. The movers should have been more explicit with their criticism. The motion as it stands could lead to all union officers (including lay officers) being unable to take up external positions in any body where there might be a difference from UCU policies - in TUC regional councils and trades union councils, for example.

The motions on **Environmental issues** and **Health & Safety** are worthy of support, as is Motion 21, on the **Shrewsbury 24 Campaign**, particularly given what is known about Police actions over Hillsborough and Orgreave.

## CONGRESS DAY I *continued*

Section 2 of the Congress agenda, on **Equality**, is a key one for UCU. Promoting equality for all, and opposing all forms of harassment, prejudice and discrimination, is enshrined in national rule 2.4 and 2.5.

It is fitting, and yet still a measure of the problems faced, that issues related to all the separate equality strands will be debated. Space here limits detailed coverage. But clearly, combatting anti-Muslim racism (Motion **24**), defending new NUS president Malia Bouttia (**25**), campaigning for justice for Sarah Reed (**26**), and campaigning for fair treatment of refugees with protected characteristics (**29**) are highly topical issues.

The stated motive of Motion **28** is the enhanced progressing of equality issues in UCU. However, opening up the equality conference to all equality reps may prove contentious.

Section 3, on **Education**, includes motions on education governance in Northern Ireland, student feedback, outsourcing, and Additional Learning Support. There is a hopefully uncontroversial NEC amendment to motion **45**, to avoid giving support for outsourcing. The key debates, however, will likely be on the response to the 'Prevent' agenda (**36**), the importance of a strategy and campaign to defend post-16 education, especially for the equality strands (**39-42**), and resistance to the attacks on nursing and social work qualifications (**46**), where UCU has already articulated strong opposition.

## A VIEW FROM SCOTLAND

*by Douglas Chalmers*

With the maturing of devolution, the union needs to consider how growing divergence in HE and FE can be best mirrored in our practice, building on positive experience of our actions, irrespective of where we are in the UK.

The passing of the Higher Education Governance Scotland Act by the last Holyrood government indicated a major achievement for the ruling Scottish National Party administration and indeed other supporters of democratising HE, in the shape of the Labour Party and the Scottish Greens.

This was the passing into legislation of the majority of the recommendations of the Von Prondzynski (2012) report into university governance.

The implications of this Act should not be underestimated – some of the more publicised aspects being the necessity for chairs of university courts to now be elected by both staff and students, with the powers of existing rectors safeguarded, and agreement that campus trade unions would have as a right, two seats on court in addition to existing staff and student representatives.

Also of key importance however was another feature of the Act changing the composition of university senates.

Over the past decades, growing managerialism has meant a downplaying of the voice of staff on senates, with a preponderance of senior management or university policy managers changing the culture from one of live academic debate amongst equals, to one where elected staff reps – normally now a minority of the committee are regularly faced with a *fait-accompli* from management in terms of academic direction.

The new act means that senates will now have to consist of a majority of members elected by staff – something which will hopefully begin to move senates towards being proper, deliberative, academic bodies.

There is still 'unfinished business' remaining around the issue of democratising governance however, - key aspects of this including moving towards gender equality on university bodies - an unfulfilled recommendation of Von. Prondzynski.

While the HE debate in Scotland has been dominated over the last couple of years by questions of governance, the achievements on this question means the issue of how to fund post-16 education is likely to move centre stage once again. SNP, Labour and Greens are still firm for no tuition fees which we support. We now need to continue our strategy of dialogue with the Scottish government to deepen union involvement in the democracy of the sector. All parts of the union can gain from this approach.

*Douglas Chalmers is president of UCU Scotland.*

## NORTHERN IRELAND AT THE CROSSROADS

### Cuts and management excesses combine for a perfect storm

by Mike Larkin

Higher and Further Education in Northern Ireland are at a critical time. The fallout from the Assembly elections on 5 May has yet to settle. We can only be sure of a continuing uneasy coalition between unionist DUP and nationalist Sinn Fein and that HE and FE will be ruled by the new Department of the Economy. Age-old tensions prevail as government seems unable to make clear decisions and is dazzled by emerging into the light of democracy.

Under the Department of the Economy there is little concession evident to our role in education. Deep cuts in 2015 will continue to bite, with even more planned. The impact of the cuts last year has already been profound.

In FE, three tranches of voluntary severance resulted on over 500 lecturers leaving the sector. A further scheme for 2016-17 has just closed, and offers have yet to be made. This has had a big impact on UCU membership in branches, and significant workload problems have emerged.

Discontent is rising since FE members were the subject of an earlier two-year public sector pay freeze and then a 1% pay cap in 2013-14. Over the past five years their pay has risen by only 1.22% in total, or approximately £440.

The HE sector is not faring much better. Both universities have seen deep cuts and job losses. The main challenge in the University of Ulster is that following a so-called 'voluntary severance' (VS) scheme, and there is now the prospect of compulsory redundancies whilst simultaneously recruiting staff, including those at the highest levels.

The loss so far of 140 staff from a target of 210 has impacted upon workloads; and courses in modern languages, housing studies, transport studies and mathematics have closed without consultation. Staff in those areas and in others were forced to take 'VS', and some are now being re-employed under part time, casualised, contracts to teach out the courses. Collective union activity by UCU means that the barely sufficient teach-out plans are an improvement on what they were initially.

A similar story emerges from Queen's University with a loss of 234 staff through VS and then many others opting to leave anyway. A radical size-and-shape review is being implemented in 2016 with school mergers and course closures coming. These moves have met with determined opposition from many staff, and openly fierce opposition from students, who have organised sit-ins and blockaded a key senate meeting to make their point.

UCU finally managed to reverse an alarming decision by management in 2015, retrospectively to impose tough conditions on existing probationary staff. However, this is only the start of a wider UCU campaign against punishing academic standards and other management tactics being deployed - including the insistence that staff meet unreasonable income targets or face capability measures.

Common to both HE institutions has been a lack of meaningful consultation, so that decisions are increasingly presented as a *fait accompli* by senior staff who seem detached from the real world of the university and are given unreasonably high salaries. Whilst this is a grave picture, there is no doubt that, without UCU's collective activity and challenge to the management of both universities, the situation would have been even worse. It is certain that UCU plays a pivotal role at this time in defending all staff from a rapidly worsening environment.

*Mike Larkin is NEC member for HE in Northern Ireland.*

### UCU Independent Broad Left

*is a group open to all like-minded UCU members who agree to work together to unite the union around a progressive trade union and equality agenda. We stand for these principles:*

- For a democratic post-secondary education system
- For professional working lives
- For a decent and fair standard of living
- For trade union unity and international solidarity
- For a growing, organising, campaigning and democratic member-led union

Check out our web site at <http://ucuindependentbroadleftnetwork.org/> and our blog at <https://ucuagenda.com/>.

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