

The British UCU Congress and the impossibility of reforming the trade unions

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The recent congress of the University and College Union (UCU) provides an object lesson in the impossibility of “reforming” the trade unions.

Held in Manchester at the end of May, it was the first opportunity for UCU members, rightly furious at the betrayal of their national strike to protect university staff pensions, to try to hold the leadership to account.

Instead, UCU leader Sally Hunt staged three walk-outs from the congress, forcing the three-day congress to end early.

This was to prevent discussion on resolutions—submitted in good order—calling for a review of union structures and demanding the UCU leadership be held to account for its undemocratic shutting down of the strike and acceptance of a sell-out deal. This was accepted against the wishes of many UCU members, who voted locally to oppose it, under conditions in which the strike was winning growing support from students and other workers nationwide.

Two motions criticised the Hunt leadership for putting the rotten deal by the employers’ organisation, Universities UK (UUK), to a ballot of members without having taken a formal vote of branches first. They accused the UCU’s leadership of a “continuous pattern of unilateral, undemocratic action,” and argued that the union should “pressurise employers to accept the will of members, not the other way around.”

Two further resolutions called for a vote of no confidence and Hunt’s censure for calling off the dispute, after a majority of branches demanded the strike remain active.

The delegates, many of whom were attending for the first time, voted five times, by ever increasing majorities, to let the resolutions proceed to a hearing—only to have their votes overruled by the congress chair and the union’s leadership.

When asked directly whether she was opposed to a debate, Hunt refused to answer. Even that question was

ruled out of order.

Hunt and her supporters among UCU administrative staff—organised in the Unite union—claimed that the motions could not be taken because they “went against their employment terms and conditions.” It was not permissible to name a member of staff (Hunt) and criticise her publicly, it was asserted, rather than using the official complaints procedure.

Unite said that a discussion of the motions would “breach agreements between Unite and UCU which protect employees’ dignity at work and right to due process”, and that any calls to censure or sack Ms Hunt “without any due process” would be “wholly unacceptable” if applied to any other member.

The reference to the rights of the union’s administrative staff is a red-herring.

Nominally, Hunt was elected by union members to protect their interests. For this she receives £138,000 a year, including a £3,000 car benefit and generous pension. She is not alone. The wages, pensions and expenses of the UCU apparatus take around 50 percent (£9.5 million annually) of members’ total dues income of nearly £20 million.

In contrast, the majority of the higher education academic workforce is casualised, with one-third of existing contracts paid by the hour. Now, thanks to the deal agreed by the UCU bureaucracy, even those with relatively decent contracts will lose at least 19 percent of the value of their pensions.

The employment rights of UCU members, however, do not count. The union bureaucracy can agree to rip these up in league with management, over the heads of their own members, whenever they wish, and members are forbidden from even criticising this.

It means that the union bureaucracy is unanswerable for its actions and unaccountable to its members.

Not only was this enforced at the UCU congress with

the implicit threat of legal action under employment law. It was backed by the repeated suspension of congress to prevent any discussion.

One delegate from the University of Warwick, Craig Gent—who states that he does not belong to any of the unions’ factions—described proceedings in a blog.

“On arrival, delegates from ordinary branches and the various regional and national committees were handed leaflets signed by the Unite committee for the UCU staff branch, arguing that if a selection of motions were allowed to be debated, it would ‘breach agreements between Unite and UCU which protect employees’ dignity at work and right to due process.’”

Gent wrote, “The Unite committee informed delegates that ‘if these motions are debated, Unite will need to hold immediate emergency meetings to consider [the branch’s] response to this attack on [its members’] rights.’”

The UCU and Unite tops joined forces to shut down congress. “With each walkout, UCU president [and Hunt ally] Joanna de Groot, as chair of the session, suspended congress on the grounds it could not proceed without tellers to count votes. Moreover, professional staff instructed the audiovisual equipment to be turned off whilst congress was suspended,” Gent explained.

To add insult to injury, Gent described how Hunt’s supporters organised “a ‘solidarity picket’ outside the congress hall after the first walkout,” and made “at least one accusation that congress appointing its own (unpaid) tellers would amount to using ‘scab labour’.”

Gent writes of “signs reading ‘no to bullying’, claims that discussing these motions [against Hunt] endangered people’s livelihoods and families, and emotive claims that people feared for their physical safety or the triggering of flashbacks to traumatic episodes.”

After the third suspension, all that assembled delegates were allowed to do was pass a motion opposing the walkouts and agreeing “We believe the union members have the right to hold our most senior elected officials to account.”

The union tops received the full backing of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain’s supporters around the *Morning Star*. Organised as the Independent Broad Left in the UCU, it dominates the leading bodies of the union.

It was integral to and backed Hunt’s actions to the hilt, condemning her critics—meaning the UCU Left, largely made up of the members of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and others—as “ultra-left” and “opportunist” and their “antics” as damaging to the union.

In fact while the UCU Left/SWP make token criticisms of “a deep democratic deficit” in the union they did not author or put their names to the two main anti-Hunt motions at the Congress. The UCU Left is opposed to a rebellion of the membership and a political and organisational break with the UCU. They are no less fearful than Hunt that anger over the union’s betrayal of the pensions struggle could result in the development of rank-and-file organisations. The pseudo-left speaks for privileged middle-class layers, hostile to the political independence of the working class. They use their positions in the union apparatus to maintain a comfortable lifestyle, while acting as a “left” flank to protect the bureaucracy.

The actions of Hunt and the UCU are not just simply those of an individual nor undeniably deficient “democratic structures.” They flow organically from the nature of the trade unions themselves, which function as industrial police on behalf of the government and employers. Their ability to increase the exploitation of their members—through declining wages, the erosion of pensions and other social rights—depends on the suppression of the democratic rights of their members.

Throughout the pensions dispute, the Socialist Equality Party and its Education FightBack campaign sought to arm workers with an understanding of the role of the unions. It explained their struggle was unfolding under conditions of growing rebellion by educators internationally to the assault on jobs, wages and conditions. And it located this attack in the deepening crisis of capitalism that is the basis of the source of austerity, war and the assault on democratic rights.

In opposition to the UCU tops and its pseudo-left apologists, the Socialist Equality Party fought for the building of independent rank-and-file committees as the only basis for the defence of workers’ rights. Events at the UCU congress have more than confirmed the necessity of this perspective.



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