

UCU recall conference seeks to silence opposition to sell-out of UK lecturers' strike

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Today's recalled University and College Union (UCU) conference was the result of the shutdown of the annual congress June 1 by the executive. The aim was to silence opposition to the UCU leadership's sell out of the 14-day strike by 50,000 lecturers, librarians, administration staff and technicians in defence of their pensions—the largest action in the history of higher education.

The UCU agreed a deal involving staff losing an average 19 percent in the value of their pensions. First proposed by the UCU on March 12, it was rejected by thousands of academic staff at meetings in universities nationally the following day. Hundreds surrounded UCU's London headquarters to demand the repudiation of the agreement. Hunt and her backers retreated before putting essentially the same deal forward two weeks later, on April 13, which was reluctantly endorsed by an angry membership.

At the congress in June, Hunt staged walk-outs with her supporters among UCU administrative staff—organised in the Unite union—on three separate occasions to force motions criticising the sellout off the agenda. These included motions from delegates at Exeter University calling for “No confidence in UCU general secretary Sally Hunt” and for her resignation “with immediate effect,” and another for the “Censure of UCU general secretary” from members at King's College London.

For silencing the membership, Hunt was rewarded by the leadership of the Trades Union Congress. Having been made president of the TUC, she opened its annual conference last month with cynical evocations of the Peterloo Massacre.

Anyone believing that today's recall will finally provide an opportunity to discuss the betrayal of Hunt and company underestimates the contempt of the union

leadership for the rank and file and democratic debate.

Hunt has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and will not be attending the conference. Her illness and absence will now be used to rule out any discussion of the motions of no confidence sidelined in June.

This enjoys the tacit support of the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), both of which have used their “left” reputation to oppose moves against Hunt et al. and any development that could provoke a break with the trade union bureaucracy of which they are a part.

An October 10 article on the recall conference by the SP reports that “the branch of general union Unite which organises UCU staff has confirmed there will be no further walkouts at our recall congress,” as if this is an admirable change of heart, before acknowledging that “because of Sally Hunt's absence, it is not clear whether recall congress will hear the critical motions”—thus rendering Unite's pledge a meaningless gesture.

The SP proposes no further action against Hunt, urging instead a few cosmetic changes to the structures of the UCU so that everyone can move on, leaving the union leadership in place but somehow “accountable” to the rank and file. These changes amount to a call for an elected official to stand in for Hunt while she is on “medical leave” instead of “unelected senior union officials,” followed by a “rule change to introduce election of full-time officials, in particular a deputy general secretary.”

The SP claims that a “national dispute committee” which the UCU agreed to set up at the aborted June conference also provides the basis for “rank-and-file oversight of the ongoing pensions dispute.”

It does nothing of the sort. There is no “ongoing” pensions dispute because it was sold out by the UCU,

and the motion passed in June states only that “national negotiators and UCU Independent Expert Panel members will report” to the dispute committee.

The SWP, which plays a central role in the UCU Left faction, published a meagre 375-word article in *Socialist Worker*, in which UCU Left representative Carlo Morelli states only, “There could be another attempt to stifle the discussion, this time by union trustees.”

Morelli states obliquely, “There are a variety of views on the left about how to respond. But whatever happens with the motions, it’s important that we have a united left to fight over pay and pensions.”

What this means is that the SWP and SP are joining forces to oppose calls for Hunt’s resignation by focusing on vague references to workers wanting to “transform their union” and hold leaders “to account.”

The SP instead declared, “Ironically, the reality is that most delegates did not want to vote to call for her [Hunt] to resign at a time when there are so many crucial disputes going on,” before admitting that a motion of censure would have passed. Even so, the SP was forced to insist that motions 10 and 11 “must be debated” at a recall conference. That is no longer an imperative for the SP, which instead wants an elected official to fill in for Hunt while she is on leave! “In the meantime, congress has huge achievements to celebrate,” the SP stresses, including “the magnificent 14-day pensions strike,” which the UCU sabotaged!

All claims that the unions can be made accountable by rank-and-file pressure are a political fraud. The UCU has proved that the response of the bureaucracy is to rely on the pseudo-left groups to police discontent while they get on with imposing whatever attacks are demanded by the employers and the government.

The public sector unions, including the UCU, accepted large-scale attacks on pensions, selling out big strikes in 2011-12. In 2016, the British Medical Association ended the largest strikes of junior doctors in the history of the National Health Service by forcing them to accept an inferior contract. This year, 13 NHS trade unions agreed a pay deal so rotten that, when it became clear it was effectively a pay cut, members of the Royal College of Nurses called a no confidence vote in the union leadership that forced the general council to promise to resign by December 31.

The demand for the rotten leaders such as Hunt to

step down is only the initial manifestation of a developing rebellion of the working class against organisations that function as an arm of corporate management. The call by the pseudo-left tendencies to implement a few reforms to the UCU’s structures is a means of directing this oppositional sentiment into safe channels, while calculating that such “reforms” will facilitate their elevation into lucrative positions within the apparatus.

UCU members face a fresh round of struggles, with strike ballots in higher and further education that close October 19. But to end the endless series of betrayals by the trade unions and take forward a genuine struggle to defend jobs, wages and conditions and vital services, such as education and health, demands the creation of genuinely democratic organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file workplace and factory committees.

We urge UCU members to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss how to take this fight forward.



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