

Report on Special HEC November 19th 2014

I attended this meeting on the USS dispute which was held at LSE Bankside. I attended to present the views of the three pre-1992 universities in the South West region which I had canvassed, but as a member of a post-1992 branch I was not able to vote.

I had presubmitted to Michael MacNeil (UCU Head of Bargaining and Negotiations) and Paul Bridge a motion from Bath and a lengthy statement from Bristol. Along with reports from other regions these were tabled at the meeting.

There was not unanimity in our region, nor nationally. This made it a very tricky issue for the committee, and many, myself included expressed feelings of conflict about the decision to be made. However, the majority of branches supported suspension of the industrial action until after the Jan 15th meeting of the JNC. This was particularly true of the branches in the devolved nations. Support for continuing the action came from the traditionally militant regions, London, the North West and Yorkshire. This partly related to the brutal response of the employers at Liverpool and Bradford in imposing 100% deductions for partial performance.

Our own region was split, with the majority in Bristol and Exeter supporting suspension and Bath having submitted a very interesting proposal for a kind of partial suspension, where the action would be called off at branches where the employers had supported the UCU position- such as Cambridge and Warwick- or had not imposed deductions, and would be continued at branches with hardline employers. This proposal was commended by Michael MacNeil for its creativity and imagination, but he doubted its practicality as he believed the employers would not accept it. Its legality under employment law was also queried.

The debate was lengthy as the complexity of the issue was acknowledged and the lack of a consensus among and indeed within branches. The following points were highlighted:

- Whatever their views about the best course of action, the membership was very angry about the position of the USS board and the behaviour of most employers.
- The major risk of suspension was the loss of momentum.
- The major risk of continuation was that members might not be prepared to keep up the action right through till January, where their salary was being deducted, especially younger members and those with children in the run up to Christmas.
- The timing of the assessment boycott was also considered a problem in some branches, as there was only a minimal amount of assessment activity going on at this time. It was likely to bite more effectively in January, when many institutions had exams.
- The point was also made that the boycott was divisive as it was not something all members could take part in.

On the basis of the discussion the vote was taken: 14 votes for suspension, 6 against and 1 abstention.

A number of motions were discussed which had been put forward by members of UCUL left. One of these was passed, which is of particular importance. This called for national strike action if, should the assessment boycott be resumed on January 16th, any employer again threatened 100 per cent reductions. This motion was passed nem con, with a number of abstentions.

A motion calling for a special HEC conference of USS universities was rejected, on the grounds that one had already been held in Manchester and another would be otiose and a waste of the union's money; that there was little point in having one before January given the decisions that had been made; and that it could only be held, given calling arrangements and so forth, in the week before Christmas which would make it very difficult for many members to attend.

What next? Negotiating meetings are being held by the various parties in the dispute every week until Christmas, leading up to the January 15th meeting. UCU will continue to contest the

regulator's parameters. If no progress is made, industrial action will be resumed on the 16th. Michael MacNeil made it clear that he was not particularly sanguine about the result and that at the JNC the employers might try to impose their proposals.

It is strongly emphasised that this is a **suspension** not a **cessation** of the industrial action. The dispute continues and branches should keep up their campaigning as a way to maintain momentum, by publicity materials, lobbies, writing to VCs and so forth.