

Minutes of extraordinary branch meeting

27th April 2018, 1:15pm, 3 East 2.4

Minutes for meeting: 39 attended, apologies from David Skidmore, Andi Barlow.

1. Welcome, Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival, UCU Training

Michael Carley (MC) informed the meeting about the Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival. MC also reminded us that we are in a good position to proactively make demands of the management. If we wanted to do so there is UCU training available to help formulate and present these demands.

2. Minutes of Previous meetings

Minutes were accepted circulated and accepted without comment.

3. Vacant Positions - nominations/volunteers welcome:

- BAME Members Rep
- International Members Rep

Nobody was nominated for either position at the meeting,

4. Motions

Sol Gamsu (SG) proposed three motions to the meeting. By way of introduction, he described how the three motions stemmed from discussions between reps from different branches after the events that lead to the suspension of recent strike action. In particular, SG and others felt that the two positions that were being discussed in response to the UUK offer — “revise and resubmit” and “no detriment” — were blurred by the UCU leadership, in particular in Sally Hunt’s emails, in order to influence the result of the suspension ballot.

First motion

REQUEST FOR HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR CONFERENCE

This branch notes:

The support and energy of our membership during the fourteen days of strike action in defence of our pensions.

The branch delegates meeting (held on the 28th March at UCU HQ, London) on the USS dispute where last minute evidence was tabled on which delegates had no opportunity to consult their members;

That at the conclusion of the branch delegates meeting, despite requests for a vote, no vote was taken on what was clearly the crucial issue the Higher Education Committee (HEC) were going to decide on afterwards - whether to send the UUK offer as it stands to a ballot or not;

The HEC meeting decided by a narrow majority of 10-8 to ballot members on a proposal from UUK whose wording was not the outcome of a formal negotiating process between the properly constituted UCU negotiating group on USS and UUK.

This UCU branch believes:

There needs to be a nation-wide conversation to address these concerns.

This meeting should also serve as the start of a broader process of reviewing the national democratic structures of the union to ensure that branches are better represented in, and central to, key decision-making.

This branch resolves:

To call for a Special Meeting of UCU Higher Education Sector Conference to discuss the USS dispute under Rule 16.11. This Special Meeting should be held immediately prior to Congress.

Proposer

Sol Gamsu, Bath UCU Postdoc Rep.

Secunder

Mesar Hameed

The motion was passed unanimously.

Summary of Discussion:

The secunder was changed from Chris Roche (CR) to Mesar Hameed (MH). SG introduced the motion by explaining that the wording is similar to motions that other branches have passed - the conference will be called if 20 branches pass such a motion.

Ben Ralph (BR) asked if there had been previous sector conferences and what had happened if so. MC answered, saying that, while they are not common, they do happen every few years, especially during disputes. SG noted that UCU officials are being very strict with the rules, suggesting that the letter of the law rather is being followed rather than conduct being guided by democratic spirit. Theodoros Papadopoulos (TP) asked for clarification: what precisely does it mean to ensure that “branches are better represented in, and central to, key decision-making.” SG agreed with the sentiment of the question, saying that there is a question of who represents who in UCU, how and where the power does and should reside: in the branches, the members, with the elected officials? CR made the point that if the branch representatives are called, the union leadership should properly take heed of what they are saying, otherwise there is no point calling them in the first place.

Second Motion

COMPOSITION OF JOINT EXPERT PANEL ON USS VALUATION

Bath University UCU notes:

The UUK proposal of 23 March 2018 was accepted by a majority of the UCU membership in an online consultation;

In UUK’s statement in response to the ballot result, UUK says a new valuation must be in place by April 2019, whereas the proposal of 23 March 2018 on which UCU members voted required “maintenance of the status quo in respect of both contributions into USS and current pension benefits, until at least April 2019”, which is not the same thing;

Bath University UCU believes:

1. That the framework, membership and work of the Joint Expert Panel on the UCU side must be directed by the membership of the UCU through direct and democratic processes;

2. That the work of the Joint Expert Panel must be conducted on a transparent basis in relation to methodology, data, and decision-making, making all information on methodology, data, and decision-making available immediately for public scrutiny, and subject to fixed deadlines;
3. That the Joint Expert Panel should not have any preconditions placed upon it in terms of affordability.
4. That any proposals produced by the Joint Expert Panel must be subject to full equality and diversity impact assessments;

Bath University UCU resolves:

1. To call on the General Secretary to immediately release to members the substance of the discussion with UUK on 16/4/2018 about the framework for the Joint Expert Panel.
2. To call on the General Secretary and the HEC to allow the membership of UCU to vote on the UCU representatives to join the Joint Expert Panel;
3. To call on the General Secretary and the HEC to insist that the details of all further discussions with UUK about the Joint Expert Panel and the work of the Joint Expert Panel be relayed immediately to the membership.
4. To call on the General Secretary and the HEC to immediately establish a formal process for members and branches to contribute to the discussion on the framework for the Joint Expert Panel.

Proposer

Sol Gamsu

Seconded

Chris Roche

The motion was passed with all but one in favour and one against.

Summary of Discussion:

SG summarised the reasoning of the motion: to make sure the JEP has some sort of democratic process in choosing UCU representatives. He argued that we need transparency in who is representing us. He informed the meeting that the motion originated in Newcastle UCU, and that other branches have passed the same or similar motions.

James Davenport (JD) informed the meeting that details for proposing nomination released on Monday. He shared his worries that if well-meaning but non-specialist UCU representatives were elected, they could end up outmanoeuvred by the UUK reps. He explained that the panel isn't for UCU to put forward our view, but only to agree on parameters and methodology for the valuation. He especially had worries if the representatives were to be elected one by one, a range of expertise should be present in the UCU representatives. Somebody asked how many representatives would be put forward from each side. JD answered by saying that the number of panellists is not yet set, reminding the meeting that the choice of chair is the first appointment to be made, and that choice may have a bearing on the number of panellists.

BR reminded the meeting that the motion does not go into detail about what sort of vote will govern the selection of panellists, that it does not commit the UCU to electing individual representatives.

TP asked what is meant by expertise, and who is considered an expert, reminding the meeting that expertise has political content as well as merely a technical aspect.

Nour Alhusein (NH) asked if branches can nominate panellists. MC predicted that this would almost certainly be the case.

Third Motion

LATE MOTION TO UCU CONGRESS: REVIEW OF UNION DEMOCRACY

Congress notes:

Concerns from many branches and members about the processes behind the consultative ballot on the USS offer of 23rd March.

The lack of inter-election mechanisms by which to recall or hold elected union representatives to account.

Most senior full-time officials of the union are appointed rather than elected.

Congress resolves:

To undertake a review before Congress 2019 of UCU's democratic structures via a democracy commission, including but not limited to discussion of the appropriate number of full-time elected officials and how elected representatives are to be held to account.

That the commission should be elected by and from branches, regional committees, devolved nations and advisory committees of the union.

To empower the commission to recommend changes to UCU's democratic structures at a one day special Congress, for discussion and voting on by branch delegates.

Proposer

Sol Gamsu

Secunder

Chris Roche

The motion was passed unanimously.

Summary of Discussion:

SG introduced the motion by reminding the branch that the strike itself had been a great, even unexpected success, but suggested that if we had pushed a little bit further at the end, we could have been more effective in demanding concessions from the employers. He shared worries that the leadership didn't see this to be the case, wondering what their strategy was and continues to be.

Tim Barrett (TB) asked when was the last such exercise was carried out, remembering one in recent years. MC couldn't think of any since the founding of UCU in 2006, except perhaps serious arguments on the topic on the occasion of the merging of two unions with very different structures to form the UCU. CR suggested that TB might have been thinking of the Commission on Effective Industrial Action, which was more recent.

SG informed the meeting that the motion had been passed by the Newcastle University branch, and possible some others.

Somebody asked what the distinction between appointed and elected officials in UCU is. MC responded by explaining that the only elected employee of the UCU is the General Secretary, and that all other employees are appointed as in other organisations. He explained that, technically, the full time staff do not take part in decision making, that their remit is only to advise. Of course, he explained to the branch, the advice that one might give is conditioned by

the views that one might hold. In the case of the recent decision to accept the offer from UUK and suspend strike action, the Higher Education Committee made the decision based on the advice of full-time officials, including the general secretary. Therefore a crucial question is what was given. In principle, he concluded, the full-time officials only advise, in practice the line blurs. The democratic structures of the union have the power to *instruct* the full-time officials, not merely to ask them. Somebody made the point that the issue of who is instructing who is important, it greatly affects how the union is run.

MC reminded the meeting that when these rules were drawn up, it was a very different union. Today, he reminded us, there is a very active and engaged membership, which was not the case eight years ago.

TP asked whether the proposal to have a democracy commission is a one off, suggesting that instead what might be needed is a continuous “democracy watch”. Perhaps an annual or biannual report on democracy should take place. MC reminded the meeting that many of these mechanisms for democratic accountability already exist in some shape or form.

5. Any Other Business

SG informed the meeting that he had submitted a motion on research time and conference funds for hourly paid lecturers, teaching fellows and postdocs to academic assembly. However, the motion was blocked by the chair Aki Sahlo. He requested for members to come to next assembly 12:30, 8th May, CB1.10 so that the blocking could be overturned, this would require a 2/3rds majority vote.

Somebody reminded the meeting that the Vice-Chancellor is giving her state of the university address. The assembly passed a motion asking her to resign in January. They asked whether the branch should do something. MC suggested that something might be doable.