

King's College London UCU delegation response to events at UCU Congress, 30th May 2018

Colleagues, comrades, friends

We are the delegates from King's College London who came to Congress representing two motions from our branch: both motions had been judged as legitimate by the Congress Business Committee and were placed on the agenda. We don't wish to repeat the very thorough and accurate account of the events that followed provided by our Exeter colleagues, which we encourage all to read

[<https://exeterucu.wordpress.com/2018/05/30/exeter-ucu-delegation-response-to-events-at-ucu-congress-30th-may-2018/>].

Instead, we wish to add an account of what this experience has been like to us as delegates, and how the current situation appears to us.

This is our first time at Congress. We come here proudly, having been selected through a ballot open to all our branch members. We come as union rank and file: we are not branch officers, nor are we affiliated to a political party, or faction within UCU itself or within any other trade union. We are here to represent our branch by proposing two motions (motions 11 and 42) which were democratically debated, voted on and passed at our branch's EGM on April 25th.

Since arriving at Congress in excitement and good faith, the following has happened: we were quietly urged to 'do what's good for the union' and drop motion 11 (the censure of the GS); we were told along with the rest of Congress that our motion might jeopardise the livelihood of paid officials' children, and their ability to pay their mortgages, that it might lead to legal action and that it threatens the unity of our union at a time when 'UUK is watching us; on twitter and elsewhere, we were accused of being SWP members plotting the overthrow of the union leadership for nefarious ends. We, as branch delegates, are especially aggrieved that after Congress overwhelmingly voted to hear the motions in the interests of democracy, some members chose to walk out, the chair announced that an industrial dispute had now been triggered and the proceedings suspended, and the momentum built up in that vote was broken. We sincerely hope that suspending a democratic decision in this way does not set a precedent for the future.

This is not a branch statement. We speak simply as rank and file members and delegates of our branch. In the General Secretary's speech, she welcomed the mobilisation of members like us. She hailed the transformative effect of our industrial action and spoke of the need for unity. Here is our view of that industrial action and unity, as witnessed by people who were on the front line as organisers in our departments and pickets.

We witnessed first hand the extraordinary outpouring of energy, the vitality the creativity and the ingenuity of our colleagues, especially that of our newest members. Our ranks swelled by 50% during that month. We were forged by those picket lines: like many others throughout the country, throughout our universities, we suddenly seized the space to really see each other and to see where the marketisation of HE is leading us and that it must be stopped. Everyone reading this statement who was part of this action knows what we are

talking about. The union was transformed because we, the rank and file, recognised at once that we are the union just as we recognised that we are the university.

But what does this transformation mean? We believe that it means a rank and file membership emerged as a powerful force which could act collectively and could act quickly. That it could forge alliances and solidarity with other unions and other members, that it could outpace and outmanoeuvre our opponents. What many of us said during the picket lines is that we cannot go back, we cannot un-know what we have come to know in this struggle. We need to continue forging greater transparency, greater accountability and greater democracy in our institutions and in our union alike.

A key moment in that transformation was the gathering outside UCU HQ in the morning of March 13th to urge our leadership that we should continue the dispute and reject the first proposal negotiated with UUK. This was a spontaneous, emergent moment: this was a moment in which the future was unscripted. We saw our strength and our potential and we took a leap of faith. For us, and for others who were there, it was an unforgettable, sea-change moment, whose energy and optimism promised a very different future for our universities than the one for which we thought we had to settle.

There is a long struggle ahead. And in this struggle we must indeed stay united. But what does unity mean, colleagues? Does it mean that certain union elected members are necessarily beyond reproach? Does it mean that, once elected, such members should exercise their will with no dissent? Does it mean that the public expression of dissent should be suppressed? As you know, we are currently witnessing such attempts at suppression from many universities' senior management. We all know the destructive effect of the rule of bureaucrats and 'leaders' in our universities. Are we to witness this at Congress as well?

Congress is the supreme political body of our union: it is our arena of democracy. It is by definition a political space. How is it possible to demand that no debate on the role and actions of the General Secretary, a senior elected political official, is possible at the membership's democratic governing body? To turn a debate about our democratic process as a union into a procedural employment dispute is to evacuate our capacity to act as a political body. The actions of the General Secretary in representing us during the dispute were the subject of our motion. Are these actions not in themselves political? If we accept that certain roles are beyond reproach, certain debates can never happen, aren't we in effect amputating this political space, this space of transformation?

Unity is indeed our goal, our horizon. But this cannot be a unity constructed on the back of stifling dissenting voices, killing off uncomfortable debate before it begins. We must never pursue unity at the price of suppression. We must work together for a more open, a more capacious union which learns from its mistakes, which is supple and responsive enough to embrace and consider dissent. The transformation of our union that the General Secretary so rightly praised in her speech cannot be barred at the Congress door.

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