

The North-West arise!

PSE talked to a UCU branch activist involved in the North-West FE industrial action.

In May, six North-West FE UCU branches began a regional campaign - including industrial action - over pay and conditions in each of the colleges. At the time of publication, Hopwood Hall and Bury College branches had reached local agreements but continue to support the struggles at Burnley, City of Liverpool, Nelson & Colne and Oldham Colleges. Here, a branch activist talks about the campaign, what led to it, and the fears and hopes for the future of FE it draws attention to.

Build up

In previous years, our branch - like other north-west branches - has been quiet: pay rises when they happened have been minimal, we grumbled. But it came to a head with inflation and members of staff who use food banks or saying they can't afford to fill up their cars. You lose really good staff and people are stretched even further.

We had similar problems in the six colleges. Cash-rich, with great amounts of savings not passed on to staff, new buildings going up. I know situations where they put up new buildings and they're not filling them, and within a few years you end up with redundancies. It was time to say enough is enough.

When we were on strike, we asked students how many teachers they had lost and what the impact on them was. That was shocking - students who didn't know what work they had to study and what was outstanding because they had a new member of staff. This can't carry on. There's been a brain drain over ten or fifteen years but it's coming to a head. At my campus, there are not many staff under forty and new staff are put off teaching for life because of the workload.

Think about the amount of unpaid time people give. Where else do you give up ten hours and not get paid for it? If you're a teacher it's OK, you're doing it for the students. But we're exhausted. We're not doing the best job we can. We're told that FE is the

Cinderella sector. But when are we going to go to the ball? You can't not know the whole story - Cinderella didn't stay in the kitchen and scrub away. It's a massive problem across the six colleges involved: them and us, run like a business, we at the chalkface trying to work with the students, the funding is not there and when it is there it's not being passed down. You can understand why teachers just quit.

When I started in FE, it wasn't badly paid for the work you did. Since then the paperwork has gone up ridiculously. Administration time is spent dealing with the students who need you to solve a problem. That affects the rest of your class, especially with large, unmanageable class sizes. It's ridiculous: you're expected to mark the books and the tests, give one-to-ones, make sure they sit all the exams, chase them up. Before you know it, you're not the best teacher you could be.

I want to get it away from people counting down for the holiday. I know I'm guilty of that. All you want to do is go on holiday and not relax but recover. That is extremely toxic. You're supposed to go on holiday to relax not recover.

Over the years there was a gradual acceptance: the feeling that we'd like more pay but we're not necessarily going to get it, a demoralised view - a slow violence that chips away at your esteem. Few people I've met towards the end of their career are positive. A lot are jaded, tired and questioning why

they ever went into FE. Paying us low wages out of competitiveness is creating a huge problem - mentally, professionally and economically.

We put our lives at risk through COVID where classes went on. We put our mental health at risk. So we've definitely earned this pay rise; for the last ten years we've earned this. We have to get out of this mindset that we 'deserve' a pay rise - no, we earned a pay rise. We've worked really hard and to be £9,000 behind a secondary school teacher who teaches just like me is demoralising. I could teach in school but came into FE to teach sixteen-plus and adults. That's what I wanted to do - and all the teachers I talked to have that kind of ethos that they're here to give back.

Coordination

We understood that this wasn't isolated to our branch. It sometimes does feel like you're on your own - that the management style in your college is not like anybody else's management style. But you realise you're on the same road.

The six colleges all stood up together and decided when to strike. There was some fall out over the timing of the first strike day: why strike on the first day of GCSE exams?

But it had impact. National and local newspapers would be looking at colleges because it was the first time anyone had sat an exam in two years. We wanted to be out on days the students didn't need us but that would impact on management and show them how connected and strong we were. There's more disruption to a staff member quitting mid-term than there is to a group of teachers striking on a day that students do not normally see them.

Our dispute was coordinated from the start. If we were taking industrial action, we'd do it as a group of colleges. We were all in conversation with each other - when should we begin and how are we going to do it? When should the strike days be? When should action short of a strike start? - coordinating how it would look, how we would use social media or WhatsApp.

Colleges have been set up as competitors which means we don't communicate with each other. WhatsApp afforded us that ability to ask what's your management like, what are your college reserves like? We started to see a familiar picture across the colleges: cash rich, money in the bank, not spending it.

Branch organising

When we had face-to-face meetings on campus, they tended to be at the end of the day when people were tired. Meetings were not well attended. We agreed meetings would be online and wouldn't last more than half an hour: in, out, do what you need to. Those meetings have been really well attended, and it was lovely to see the numbers ticking up on the branch WhatsApp.

I noticed the amount of people who said it's the first time in ten years they felt the union was doing something for them and listening to them. I think we fell into a bit of apathy. Not a great wage but we ticked along and then along comes inflation when people realised - we're not ticking along, we're just surviving, and it hits us: we're going to drown.

Especially since action short of a strike, we realise how much time teachers give to the college and what they have to prioritise to do that. But a major problem was the idea that if you stand up for your rights you get into trouble. If you put your head above the parapet it's going to get shot.

But people who have been in the union for years have got active. We've had 'spiders' - people in different departments who don't want to be reps but have those one-to-one conversations with members or with people not in the union. If a rep goes and talks to a non-member they think 'you're a rep, there's something in it for you', although there isn't, but not if they talk to somebody who is just a union member. And in any case, it's hard for the reps to get round everyone.

We've seen a massive increase of active members and members joining. Hopefully, the pay rise will show non-members the advantages of joining. But I found people joining because they want more respect. People are a bit embarrassed when they're asked about their job. There's a view that anyone can teach in a college, it's not a real job which isn't true.

That's one of the great things about our WhatsApp group - staff who have discovered apps and resources are sharing them not just with their department but college wide. You know it helps all the staff understand what we're doing and how relevant it is. Our dispute has helped communication about pedagogy, not just about the action and the reasons for it.

The Hopwood Hall and Bury deals

These deals are not just the pay rises. In September, we're talking about class sizes, TOIL, holidays, workloads. These things were also part of the formal dispute and need to be addressed to make this job manageable. But it's also about dignity and respect: we're not paid enough for the workloads we have; we don't get the holidays we need to recover. This says a lot about these colleges that they have decided to sit down with us and negotiate after a legacy of ignoring us. It says a lot more about those colleges unwilling to talk with staff.

The deals were voted for overwhelmingly in both branches but we're still supporting the other north-west branches anyway we can: solidarity through social media, reminding members the struggle is ongoing and there are picket lines to join, and making sure other unions are aware that they're striking as well.

And now?

It's called college for a reason. It's about collegiality. That's been lost and we need to fight to get it back. It's about dignity and respect.

You know, we are bloody good teachers. Sometimes management say they know that but they don't seem to recognise it. They don't see us on Friday afternoon at 2.30 teaching a bunch of 16 year olds who'd rather be elsewhere or how much work goes in behind the scenes to keep it going.

That's why I get worried that there are not many young people coming in to teach in FE because there's going to be a break. The idea the Government had of getting people from industry to teach vocational courses? As soon as I saw that, I thought no one is going to come in. No one's going to take that pay cut. I've heard from other institutions where people have come in, have a lovely tour of the campus, love the set up, and the final question is how much do you pay? They just walk out.

Further education isn't just 16 to 19 year olds. It's adult education, outreach, lifelong learning, prison learning, people within the care system. We're dealing with a lot of different demographics and if they take that away you'll end up with a poorer society because after 16 there'll be no education for you to get a skilled job. But what kind of job can you get at 16? I was stacking shelves at 16 but I

wouldn't want to do that for the rest of my life.

I'm a product of the FE system. It gave me a second chance. I don't know where the sector is going in the next ten years but something radical has to happen, else we will be the last generation who want to teach in FE.

There's got to be a point where you stop going on about finances and start seeing the human beings in front of you. You've got to look at the long-term impact. There's too much short-termism in FE, although it's not just FE who are suffering - there are people in HE as well and the way that pensions are being treated. HE staff joined us on our rally, we joined them on their rally - making those links. We used to think that when students are eighteen, they leave us to go off to university. It's a bit of a closed-shop way of thinking. We should think about secondary, FE and HE. There should be a river connecting them. You find that students have struggled from primary to secondary and we should be able to address that but we're all still fixated on league tables. I think things would be improved if we had that relationship between the different sectors of education.

Something has massively gone wrong in education and how it's funded, and how inclusive FE should be but how dogmatic it's become. It really worries me. For me, FE is something that is rebellious to a certain extent. It creates free thinkers. There isn't that staff-student divide you find in schools. We take students on their second, third or fourth chance. We open doors for them. We listen to them. 'I had terrible teachers at school'. 'Okay' we say, 'let's get that off our chest'. And they're like: 'What, can I say things about teachers?' 'Yes, you can say things about teachers'. We need that holistic approach.