

FE struggles on the Tyne!

A UCU branch activist from Newcastle College, one of the six NCG colleges, talks about their dispute, how the college has changed, and how staff are pushing back.

From Newcastle College to NCG

NCG was the Newcastle College Group - now it's just NCG. There's Newcastle College, Newcastle College Sixth Form, Carlisle, West Lancs, Kidderminster, Lewisham, Southwark. It likes to buy up smaller colleges. There doesn't seem to be any reason except *'what can we buy up next?'*

Every NCG college has its own brand and we're separate branches. Newcastle's the biggest. The colleges have their local principalship that reps meet with, and college agreements, but for a lot of negotiations the branches negotiate with the NCG Executive as one group. In our dispute, members balloted as NCG. It gets confusing but it can be really positive. More branches, more sway. At the same time, if one branch wants something and another wants something else that might become an issue.

Organising

Teams has been a massive difference. Before Teams, we had meetings at the different colleges. People travelled. Madness. There's a union Joint Partnership Meeting every half-term or so - UCU and Unison. Since the dispute, cross-branch meetings have been started for all NCG members. That's quite helpful. Otherwise we never speak to each other and forget that others exist really.

Membership has rocketed since the dispute. Newcastle College is one of the biggest FE branches in the country - although not everyone here is in the same union. People are in NEU and Unison, although only UCU and Unison are recognised. UCU members are not all teachers - there are support staff, work experience coaches, learning mentors. They have a choice of UCU or Unison, but when industrial action was announced quite a few joined from those areas.

The industrial action really helped. Before that, people seemed to utilise the union when they had a problem - an attendance review, a disciplinary. But people started to see the power of the union and the part they could play when we took action. One of

the first things that happened was everyone was invited to join a big online group. That made a massive difference. People shared their issues and gave each other advice. And just chatting on the picket line - it was *'oh, can I get involved?'* Just people doing small things - someone runs the membership list, someone updates the Facebook page.

It feels much more sustainable than just having a few branch officers. We lost two branch chairs within two years because staff turnover is so high. You get someone really good in place but then *'oh, I'm leaving'*. Haemorrhaging staff means haemorrhaging UCU members and trying to find replacements happy to do casework and things. Not everyone is.

Staff turnover has been shocking for a while but particularly now. The way we've been treated during industrial action has been the last straw for a lot of people. Industrial action has shown that people don't feel valued here - enough to say *'I don't want to do this anymore'*.

The College

Newcastle College is massive - it's always been massive. Over 1000 staff. People keep to their own departments, work in separate buildings, don't see each other. And there are off-site campuses - Aviation at the airport, Rail down at Gateshead. It's expanded in the time I've been here - Newcastle Sixth Form College was developed and the Rail Academy, for example. HE provision has expanded. But it's the workload that has increased mostly.

I was in secondary education before I came here. I took a pay cut but you didn't have the hassle you had in school. You just taught. But now we have to teach, chase attendance, do the pastoral stuff - write notes about where students are in about three different systems. Lecturers are not seen as teachers but we do pretty much what a teacher does but are paid less and get less holiday.

When I came here, we were left alone, observed once a year. Now it's a lot of micromanagement, especially since we failed Ofsted in 2018. People in

your classroom all the time, hammered for attendance, hammered for retention. How does that fit with, say, adult students? If they don't want to come in, what are you meant to do? Ring their parents? We have very little leverage. They've got lives. They might have a job or childcare, might be carers. We get why they can't come in. The people above us know this as well. They're not stupid. But it's *'well, attendance has to be 90 per cent. We don't care how you get there. Figure it out, that's your job'*. But no-one's offering any solutions.

And there's definitely been a change in the students. I don't think the pandemic helped. Adults want to be here but maybe students coming from school have forgotten how to learn formally. It's a bit better this year but the last couple were challenging. They've not sat exams. They spent their GCSE years just learning on their computers. Here, you've got 42 days to withdraw them before they affect the retention statistics. That's fine, but after that you've got to weigh up - if I keep them are they going to achieve or actually come in? But withdrawing them hits your targets. So it's really hard to get rid of a student. Students know that they can come in late, or not come in, or not listen because they're not kicked off the course. They're right. What leverage do we have?

We've not got time to chase them properly anyway. Attendance was much better when we had attendance officers. They were awesome. They'd say *'who are your problem students?'* That was their job. But attendance officers don't exist anymore. Cost savings. The tutorial guys have also gone. It's all our responsibility now. Students speak really highly of Learning Support here. So that's one positive.

Management aren't blind to the problem. But targets spill down from the top to the bottom. We're on the frontline teaching, not them. That's where it piles up. So I think the biggest changes have been the workload and culture - micromanagement, scrutiny.

When I started, the quality of teaching probably wasn't as good as it is now but there's scrutiny and excessive scrutiny. The teaching and learning policy includes observations but some managers take things into their own hands - do as many observations as they want, don't really follow the policy. The managers I've worked with have mostly been really good, but people are asking *'why am I putting up with this when I can get an easier life?'* I know it's not unique to Newcastle. Far from it, it's the culture of FE across the whole sector now, driven by Ofsted and other pressures.

Most of our managers have teaching experience but senior managers, heads of department don't teach. Some managers are quite young. They can't

have been doing it for long but become removed from the process. They're the ones often scrutinising teaching and learning.

Picket lines

The picket lines - 70 or 80 people some days - were great. Members got talking to each other, felt less isolated. I've met people I've never met before - knew their name but had never seen their face. They think *'oh, it's a bit rubbish in our section'* but when they get talking, they realise it's everyone, stories are repeated across different sections *'It isn't just me who doesn't like my job. It is a bit crap'*.

Although we haven't been on industrial action since the end of October, people keep joining. Every time NCG puts a comms out, UCU and Unison both get more members. It just riles people.

The students have been really good. One day it was chucking down on the picket line. Horrible. Some students ran to the corner shop and got us all ponchos. Some made little TikTok videos. The HE students walked out and got pictures of us on the picket lines. When we came back after the first three days strike, adult students were like *'we fully support you - crack on and do it'*. They feel the cost of living too. A few said *'you're affecting my education'* but 90, 95 per cent supported us, not just the adults, 16 to 19s as well. They put stickers on their lanyards.

The college has just done a student survey. One question was - not *'has the industrial action impacted your progression?'* - but *'how much has the industrial action impacted your progression?'* We weren't happy with that. Students obviously said *'greatly'*. But a lot of the adult students said *'it's not my lecturer's fault'*. You kind of want that but it's a catch 22. If they say *'it massively affected us'*, NCG say *'see what you've done'*; if they say *'well, it didn't do anything'*, NCG say *'that didn't work, did it?'* Why was that question even put in? It doesn't change anything. If the students say the computers are crap, they can get new computers. But what if they say the industrial action was a problem? It was just another guilt trip.

Alternatives

I have my ideas of what FE could and should be. There's the issue of universal free education and young people here paying nine grand to do a degree. Being a UCU activist brings you a more political perspective. But for a lot of teachers, it's *not what should education look like*, more *what should my job look like?* The big issue is workload.

But I think members are getting more political awareness. For example, learning support lecturers were talking about how poorly paid they are. They're term-time only, some are fractional, and how '*I only get paid as much as a cleaner*'. But someone else pipes up '*Imagine this place without cleaners! We all don't get paid enough. Why is the money at the top? Why isn't more distributed?*' Without realising it, they're doing it. There's definitely that questioning.

Another thing we're talking about is how much money the college gets for special educational needs learners. They can claim a significant amount for some supported learners. But it was '*where is that money going? Not in my pay packet. Not improving facilities. NCG said they haven't got any money, so where did they spend it all? Why are they buying other colleges?*'

People are starting to question. '*Why is NCG one of the biggest in the country?*' Instead of working together to offer the broadest provision possible it all became about competition, capitalism in that sense, and who can get the most students. Nonsensical really. Newcastle set the trend.

I'm sure local needs in Lewisham are different from local needs in Newcastle although there's surely some overarching view of what education should be like. But I can't really see what benefit a setup like NCG brings to the average person who works or studies here. It only benefits the people making the money, doesn't it?

Keeping momentum

When the dispute kicked off, we got quite a lot of press coverage, loads of public support. A couple of people drove past shouting abuse but most honked their horns, hands out the window, really positive. The BBC and Chronicle came, a couple of radio stations, *Tribune* did an article. Members really liked it. We were getting attention.

The vibe hasn't dropped off, which is really good. We've just been offered a pay deal, so after that it's not letting people just settle and take any crap they're given. I don't think they will. People are much more aware of their rights. They're saying '*you know what? During my 30 minute lunch I don't work. If my manager says 'there's a call' I'm like, well, this is my 30 minute unpaid lunch*'. The more people do that, the more people feel emboldened to do it.

It's keeping the momentum going. People posting every day on the group-chat helps massively, it keeps the discussion going. Members have said, '*it's not just the money, it's the workload*'. We need to cut out the things we shouldn't really be doing. Like invigilating. Sometimes support staff or

work experience coaches have to invigilate exams. That's not in their contract. But for some reason people get forced into it. If your boss tells you to do it, what are you going to do? To be fair, management have offered to look into this, as well as begin job evaluation. So that's positive.

But if the branch choose to accept the pay offer, workload will be the next thing to negotiate on.

PSE: where we stand

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in all sectors of post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.