

UCU H.E. 4-fights campaign: what is to be done?

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In this article I discuss UCU strategy in the ongoing 4-fights campaign in Higher Education. I do so from the perspective of a lecturer and trade union activist in a post-92 university in the Northeast of England. Let us begin on common ground. Many, if not most, would agree that improved pay and conditions are worth fighting for. However, the question is one of strategy. How is this to be achieved?

In making my case, I hope to pitch a point of view and stimulate debate. My argument is this: the current campaign has achieved some success but is in danger of foundering on the rocks of poor national leadership. My intention is not to be sectarian, although, for the sake of full disclosure, my viewpoint, as will perhaps become apparent, is broadly in line with that of UCU Left.

The campaign started brightly, coordinated with a National Day of Strike action with unions elsewhere, in my view an effective strategy, though one largely conspicuous by its absence since. Our branch mounted one of its most successful campaigns, with high levels of participation and, most pleasingly, the presence of a new generation of activists on the picket line. We recruited new members. The success of this early phase led, nationally, to a marginally increased pay offer of five to eight per cent, though this, rightly in my view, was rejected.

In contrast, the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) was more problematic. Participation was low, so it was easier for management to isolate, intimidate and, ultimately, disillusion members and activists. The university adopted a hardline stance throughout, sticking to 50 per cent deductions and refusing to cap them. Despite this, we organised local fund-raising events and garnered donations from non-MABing colleagues and other universities in the region.

To come to the question of leadership, it is undoubtedly the case that some of the challenges we now face would have been the same regardless of the make-up of the national leadership. The intransigence of the employers' body, UCEA, the usual government refusal to get involved, the punitive financial sanctions imposed by universities, coupled with their general refusal to call on UCEA to reopen negotiations, have all made things difficult.

However, in my view, poor decision making by national leadership has stalled the campaign at key stages. These decisions range from the 'pausing' of it, with no increased pay offer on the table, through calling off the MAB, to the failure to hold a summer re-ballot to renew the mandate. Most recently, and most damagingly in my view, the Higher Education Committee (HEC) has met to 'offer' individual branches the chance to opt out of strike action.

Arguably, this also speaks of a democratic deficit in the union. The MAB was called off after yet another e-consultation, even though 62 per cent of those participating in it voted for its continuation. E-consultations have their value, but are no substitute for collective debate as a prelude to collective decision making and action. The emergency HEC meeting was called without a prior Branch Delegate Meeting (BDM) and the decision to offer branches an opt-out overturns the decision of the BDM in August which voted 2:1 to call five days of strike action at the end of the existing mandate in September. Surely, decisions should be taken by branches and their delegates, not unilaterally by the HEC and General Secretary (GS)?

The decision to offer an opt-out of an aggregated ballot for democratic strike action risks derailing the campaign. As I write, disappointingly, our branch has just voted to do just that, on a turnout of under 30 per cent, hardly surprising given the short notice and time frame for voting. And all of this is happening at exactly the same time as members are being asked to vote on the next round of strike action! Such muddled thinking militates against building a united front in the campaign, essential coming out of the fragmented MAB experience.

More broadly, such decisions undermine notions of collective action, solidarity, and national pay bargaining. Whatever happened to strength in unity, the cornerstone of trade unionism? Our union deserves better national leadership as we move into the next phase of the campaign and I support the motions/letters of no-confidence in the GS as a necessary, though not sufficient, first step towards a more democratically accountable union that fights for its rank-and-file membership.