

Recrimination, despair and the UCU H.E. ballot

UCU activist

Yes or no in UCU's current ballot? For me? A vote Yes would be with low expectations. A No would be the first time in 30 years as an active member of UCU and before that NATFHE. Uncomfortable. Think Jack London (1): 'corkscrew soul', a backbone of 'jelly and glue'. Of course, voting No isn't strike-breaking but there has been plenty of that and boundaries are slippery. (Voting No can mean voting against those who would benefit most: early career, precarious contracts.) But as far as I know only two branches in my region took part in the MAB to any noticeable degree. Mappers in my branch were a tiny number, although non-mapping members were often very 'supportive'. Sympathy not solidarity? A professor up the road despaired at being the only mapper in the department. A branch meeting down the road was almost split whether to participate or not in the current strike action. A slim majority said withdraw. Anecdotally, we hear of people leaving the union, perhaps that should be that people will leave the union. I don't know the data.

So where's the problem?

Most of us are not deeply grounded in the debate, don't follow the small print from national committee meetings, aren't factionally aligned.

No question but that the employers have been hard-line. Punitive deductions for partial performance even when assessment is a minor part of the individual's workload have been well-documented.

How many picket lines have there been since 2018? A friend, not in HE but a time-served union activist in industry then FE, said: 'sometimes you need to know when to step back'. That's a tactical decision. UCU and NATFHE have always had a strong 'one more push' contingent and maybe many activists who've never really been out of education. Is the difference between a student and an academic activist a post-grad qualification and a mortgage? I don't know. The situation is messy.

When things are a mess, scapegoats are inevitable - a self-protecting necessity.

The problem is the General Secretary. The problem is national office. The problem is a factional HEC. The problem is a HEC of members elected on tiny votes by a disinterested membership. The problem is that the constitution is not properly adhered to. The problem is the rules don't reflect the actual views and preparedness for action of the

members. The problem is leadership, or lack of leadership, or lack of the right leadership, or of leaders who want to lead from the front without doing the spade work: leaders not organisers.

Or maybe, sometimes, you have to stop, regroup, assess. At one point, I can't remember when, the GS suggested as much. In a very long essay. Put out at the wrong time. It looked like pique.

What we do know is that union density is low. 35 per cent of eligible members? Even in branches with the best ballot outcomes that can mean less than a sixth of eligible participants participating in action. HE is professionally fragmented. As commentators have noted, its culture is competitive, individualised, sometimes quite toxic. Not quite the proletarianised 'education workers' some might identify as.

If the pension issue was clear and clean, for many, the Four Fights is nebulous, although the issues are important. Linking USS to the Four Fights was a calculated gamble - a way of dragging weaker branches along behind the bigger, often better resourced pre-92s. Aggregation likewise. Stronger branches lend votes to the weaker. Everyone gets over the line. Except does this only work where strong organising cultures can cohere support? Such organising cultures won't guarantee success in disputes but may mean a better alignment between members - their resources, hopes, expectations and worries - and the decisions made at different levels of the union. None of this is new.

Issue 111 of *Post-16 Educator* featured 'Lessons in Organising' (2), which although focused on schools speaks to the current HE situation. There is a call for a Workers Enquiry (3). An honest and open collective reflection on organising, strikes, their complex trajectories, is an adult suggestion. More likely will be recrimination and despair.

1. Jack London *Ode to a Scab* <https://www.rmtlondoncalling.org.uk/content/ode-scab-jack-london-1876-1916>

2. Interview: 'Lessons in Organising' *Post-16 Educator* 111, April-June 2023 <http://post16educator.org.uk/psearchive/>

3. Demet Sahende Dinler: 'Strategy, Temporality and Collective Learning: An Alternative Proposal for the Future of UCU Campaigns in the UK' <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/strategy-temporality-and-collective-learning-alternative-proposal-for-future-ucu-campaigns-uk>