

UCU: a way forward

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Let's do a little imagining and paraphrase Lloyd George in 1919: 'if a force arises in the university which is stronger than the university itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the university . . . are you ready?' After the marking and assessment boycott (MAB) last year, we know that there is still work to do to be able to achieve this. There has been much discussion in this journal and elsewhere about the successes and failures of the MAB (1).

The paraphrased quote provides us with a goal but, I would argue, also highlights the importance of (political) education to achieving such a situation and the interim struggles and victories that are needed on the way to this. The issue here is that I'm not sure we do want to take over the functions of the university, at least in anything like their present form. We want to abolish or utterly transform many of them. A struggle in the university is always (or should always be) a struggle against the university as it is, and for the creation of something different. We might say 'abolition' here, but that requires a vision of what would replace it.

Overcome

If the goal is to create a union (or quite possibly unions - under the current structure (which is another problem; in my view we ultimately need to overcome and dissolve the distinctions between different education workers to truly win) that is powerful enough to achieve that, a key element will be a process of political education in and through struggle. This requires the unpicking of the positioning and consciousness of academics who are symbolically, culturally and (relative to other workers outside of senior management) economically dominant within their institutions. An

unfortunate result of this power imbalance is that these workers do not necessarily see themselves as workers - see Le and Osserman's excellent work on this question (2). Nor do they always see other workers as equals or as sharing the same problems. The period of strike action since 2018 has created an opening for a new form of consciousness. Solidarity between striking staff and students has been particularly key, and this work will, hopefully, become easier as more staff come through with substantial debts due to the tuition fee system in the UK. Solidarity between different groups of workers within higher education is in an even more nascent state and requires more debate and discussion.

What is at stake in a struggle within the university is always the meaning, purpose and value of education. Academics are drilled to behave as studious, obedient and highly competitive students. We are in the education system for the longest time - our bodies are marked by this experience and marked unequally along dimensions of disability, class, race and gender. To be successful, to gain paid employment, and even more so 'permanent' paid employment, you have to be able to spin a neoliberal narrative of success and achievement. This creates a whole set of dispositions and practices, a habitus you could say, which must be thrown off as part of the struggle within and over education. (I do not say 'for the university' because I'm not sure that the university is the shape or form of higher education that will enable working-class / subaltern emancipation and the struggle against capitalism and the climate crisis.)

The problems of this orientation towards education are not simply the product of neoliberalism. They run deeper than this. They are tied to education as a colonial, patriarchal and capitalist endeavour. There

are many aspects of this to unpick. I want to focus, just briefly, on one: the relationship of the left (let's keep that term as a way of describing a complex multitude of forces that requires work to build and solidify) to education and how that relates to what universities create.

Anarchist thinkers of the late 19th century were critical of the creation of 'professional' scholars - the division between physical labour and intellectual work was a problem (3). Revolutionary educational experiments followed this line, with schools in the Paris Commune seeking to overcome distinctions between physical and intellectual labour, industry and art (4). The systematisation of (state-funded) education (5) has moved us very far from this.

Struggle

Education is not seen as a tool for struggle. It is not seen as a crucial element of revolutionary change and potential. Instead, the primacy of research with university career-building means that education is primarily seen as a means for narrow individual advancement and a process of collective knowledge creation amongst an intellectual elite, many of whom have little or no meaningful connection to political or social movements capable of creating the change that is needed. Of course, there are a significant minority who take a more activist orientation to their educational work (6), but the normative practices of the contemporary university mean that knowledge is fundamentally out of shape, out of joint with the forms of knowledge that are required for revolutionary and structural change at scale. The barriers to access are still too high, the content still needs to represent the urgency of change and foster praxis, and in most cases research remains overwhelmingly distant from struggle. We are not simply struggling here against the structures of the university but also against the lack of practical (not theoretical) political experience of many education workers, even after the struggles of recent years.

We need a conception of education which not only provides the utopian vision of the (higher) education system that we wish to build but also contains the interim conception of education for and in struggle that would be capable of achieving a different system. Practically, that means thinking: how can the normative notions of academic labour be subverted, but also fundamentally restructured, in the consciousness of more higher education workers? This is impossible without further organised struggle in universities. Education must

be embedded within that struggle as part of a strategic cultural shift within higher education unions.

A radical understanding of what education is must be combined with an understanding of how knowledge is produced in and through struggle:

. . . disputes sparked by everyday material issues and demands in 'normal times' represent the tip of an iceberg of underlying class conflict, which becomes clearer as the struggle gains momentum. In this sense, as Brecher writes, it may be said that 'the issue is not the issue' (Brecher, J. [1997], *Strike!* Boston: South End Press, p. 282). Workers' experience of exploitation and oppression creates an ongoing resentment and class anger that may not itself spark resistance but rises to the surface and becomes explicit in situations of open conflict. This 'dual' or hidden consciousness was evoked by Gramsci in arguing that worker resistance 'signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes - when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality' (ibid., 327). (Cohen, S. 2011, 'The Red Mole: Worker's Councils as a Means of Revolutionary Transformation' in Ness, D. [ed.] *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' control from the commune to the present*. Haymarket Books: p. 56)

Workers in dispute have a strong understanding of what is at stake in their own workplaces. We have come a long way in the political thinking and understanding of higher education workers in UCU over the last five years, but there is still a long way to go before we can say that workers in our union will act 'as an organic totality'. Too many members, including those who are active, are too willing to slip back into the university as it is once strikes are over. It is important here not to slip into excessive pessimism, whilst simultaneously avoiding the belief that we can instantly (or ever) achieve a union solely composed of militant members. Both positions are incorrect and have an unrealistic perspective of how radical and structural change can and does occur.

To give a practical example of this from recent disputes, one of the reasons given for the weakness of our position during the MAB, particularly by those on the right of the union and certain union bureaucrats, was the 'low density' of the union as a whole. This is undeniably true in some branches where activity has been less systematic and branch

structure and membership has only begun to be restored during the MAB action of 2022-23. It is also true in some departments of branches that have been built up through action over USS and in some local disputes over job cuts. Within the MAB it resulted in patchy outcomes both within and between institutions. However, departmental distinctions did not systematically undermine the effects of the MAB in more active, well-structured branches, including here in Durham. Locally, I think there is more value in organising more deeply amongst professional services staff, as well as in certain departments with low density. There needs to be a sensible discussion about realistic levels of density combined with a more political understanding of the university as an institution and how we can systematically attack and undermine divisions between workers as part of a strategy of deeper organising into the whole structure of the university.

One of the issues that we have as activists is quite simply that we do not have the spaces to discuss strategy collectively and in a participatory manner. Considering we are education workers, our own education work within the union is very poor. Whilst rep training provides the technical and mechanical aspects of being a union rep (casework, employment law etc), the political aspects of organising are sorely lacking - getting issues, building campaigns, engaging with union structures, inter-union solidarity and gaining political traction beyond the union. There are some centrally coordinated courses on some of these topics, but we need a systematic and regular pattern of rep and member political education that is organised from the bottom up and locally.

Earlier in the year I attended an NEU residential rep training/education event in County Durham. It was a two-day residential with practical sessions on building campaigns, discussion of theories of organising and membership and plenty of social time to allow reps to get to know each other and have fun (quizzes, bingo, meals). At rep training that I have attended for UCU this social side of union political education has been missing or has happened informally at the behest of members rather than as something more supported by the organisers.

Centrally provided courses run through UCU offices have a role, but local, activist/rep-led organising of political education is crucial. We need education that enables members and reps to learn and plan organising methods. One of the tasks at the County Durham NEU event was a session where attendees had to plan and pitch a campaign to a panel of experienced reps and organisers with funding available to support campaigns. This sort of

educational culture is lacking from much of the everyday running of our branches. The model of political education and organising was not created in NEU overnight but was the work of ten years or more of consistent effort. We need to think about a transformation on a similar scale and timeline.

What local steps have we taken towards this at Durham? In March 2023 we had plans for a joint event with Durham NEU to bring together education workers to imagine the education system we want and need. Unfortunately this was prevented by the abrupt 'pause' announced by UCU national officers, meaning that the UCU strike dates were pulled. One of the practices we have done at various rallies - a joint rally with NEU earlier in the '22-23 dispute and more recently at a Palestine/Gaza solidarity rally - is getting members to talk to each other about strategy and action in small circles. Pickets, rallies and demonstrations should be pedagogic spaces - speeches have their place but far more important is to get members to talk, learn from each other and commit to taking whatever forms of action they can. We need a dialogic, participatory strategy for collective events - if you bring together tens or hundreds of members, reinforcing passivity by simply providing speakers is a missed opportunity.

Participatory

Enough is Enough was a gigantic and criminal waste of an opportunity to foster a collective, participatory spirit of mass action during the strikes of 2022 and 2023. Creating a large email list and some big twitter accounts is a pitiful legacy and underlines the limits of top-down approaches and the lack of political imagination at the top of the labour movement. To paraphrase another colleague, the right of the union and various senior figures like to talk about building density and empowering the grassroots but frankly they are crap at it. Meaningful growth and participation will come from basic local rank and file work and a shift towards a dialogic political approach. The use of twitterspaces and youtube live is not designed for this approach, particularly when you have selective chairing and deleting of comments in the chat by those close to the leadership, as has happened during the 2022-23 dispute. Networking is possible through social media but it is not the place for strategic planning, political education and dialogue.

Locally we are also developing some time for dedicated political education. During the strike days in late September 2023 after national action (the

MAB in this case) had been pulled - this time by the HEC, we held a planning and training day. We had a panel on casework from a group of experienced caseworkers about their experiences of helping members, and we held a series of small group discussions about strategy for the branch going forward and reflecting on the MAB. On this latter point, I think much more tactical and strategic discussion is necessary - not by shouting at each other on twitter but by sitting in spaces together and strategising the way forward on national strategy. Regional discussion between branches with different experience of the MAB is also key. We have to discuss the variability in its effectiveness, and also what worked, because in places it was highly effective. The fact that there has been no real pedagogic space for reflection and learning underlines the strategic failures and limits to the political culture within UCU. It also reflects a conservatism, both of national leadership but also of a substantial segment of our members.

The re-election of Jo Grady, who has moved from insurgent rank and file candidate to candidate of the right in five years, is a reflection of this conservatism. It also speaks to the need for the left of the union to get organised. There is a fundamental and deep-seated lack of political experience and imagination in the way the union has been led over the last five years. If we believe in building a transformative, grassroots and militant culture, political education will be a crucial element of this. This requires slow, persistent and participatory forms of organising at a local and regional scale. It also requires a more organised and more committed rank and file organisation and network to support those members and reps who want to undertake the work necessary for the shift in political culture that is required. UCU Rank and File network, born out of the failures of national leadership during the 2021-22 dispute, provides a source of hope but also underlines the work that has to be done by those on the left of the union (7). *Notes from Below's* 'University Worker' bulletin has also been a useful complement to the work of this journal and their planned rank and file education day will also be an important event (8). We have to align a radical pedagogical educational programme for union organising with a radical project for education as a whole.

This will always be a difficult project given the passivity and engrained small-c conservatism of many education workers, particularly the traditional academic membership of UCU. But we must not waver or fall into despair; there is too much at stake. In the face of the climate crisis, the fight for spaces

in education that are anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, grassroots and driven by the interests of the global working class has never been more urgent. The work required cannot be underestimated but nor should we think that it is impossible either. The struggle for the political consciousness of higher education workers is also a struggle over the meaning and purpose of education itself.

References

1. I wrote about the end of the MAB and the local situation at Durham for *Notes from Below* in September: Hope and strategy after the MAB//Notes From Below.
2. Le, A. and Osserman, J. (2021) 'Who will survive the university?' *Radical Philosophy: Journal of Socialist Feminist Philosophy* 2(10): 63-68 and Le, A. and Osserman, J. (2022) 'Our Consciousness and Theirs: Further Thoughts on the Class Character of University Worker Activism'. *Viewpoint Magazine*.
3. Avrich, P. (2014) *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States*. Princeton University Press.
4. Ross, K. (2016) *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Verso Books.
5. Muller, D., Muller, D. K., Ringer, F. & Simon, B. (eds) (1989) *The Rise of the Modern Educational System: Structural Change and Social Reproduction 1870-1920*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Joseph-Salisbury, R. & Connelly, L. (2021) *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism*. Manchester University Press. and Syson, L. (2020) 'Academic activism in UK higher education: a critical pedagogy perspective' (Doctoral dissertation, Durham University).
7. I have been part of the UCU Rank and File network which began as a whatsapp group in April 2022 <https://ucurankandfile.wordpress.com/>.
8. For more on the University Worker see: <https://notesfrombelow.org/author/university-and-college-worker>. Details of their education event on 24th March <https://lu.ma/uni-rank-and-file-march-2024>.