
The UCU General Secretary election - some observations

By a retired FE teacher.

Depending on your viewpoint, Jo Grady's time as UCU General Secretary (GS) has either seen a better organised, more active union, improved ballot results and some serious wins across all sectors of post-16 education, or it has been a mess of internal tensions, indifference to the union's democratic structures and missed opportunities. If the dispute over the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), the pre-1992 university pension, can be scored a success, the Four Fights drive over pay, pay equality, casualisation and workload across the HE sector as a whole remains unresolved.

Here I look at the outcome of the 2024 GS ballot which Grady won by a much reduced margin and wonder what, if anything, this means; where, if anywhere, this takes us.

In 2019, Grady was the independent left alternative to Matt Waddup, arguably the 'official' GS-in-waiting after Sally Hunt's departure, and the UCU Left's Jo McNeil. Buoyed by the growing activism over the USS, Grady confidently gained almost twice the first-round votes (11,515) as Waddup (6,104) and McNeill (6,019), and beat Waddup two-to-one on the second count (64.2 per cent to 32.6 per cent), although as a proportion of total membership the final tally for Grady was a much lower 13 per cent.

If Grady's campaign reflected a desire for some independence from the factional tension that had marked the union in the preceding years, it was buoyed by not a little optimism. The 20.5 per cent turnout was high for a union GS election. But times change. What was fresh became encumbered. This time Grady was the 'official' candidate. But how did the vote this time compare to that in 2019?

First, Grady's support fell significantly. Some who actively campaigned for her in 2019 shifted elsewhere, notably to Vicky Blake. Indeed, Blake arguably occupied a similar factionally non-aligned space to that of Grady in 2019. But, as one UCU activist put it, given the factional and organisational

tensions that have emerged during her time in office, Grady needed a big majority in this election to reaffirm her leadership position. That, she failed to get. Indeed, Ewan McGaughey, who lost to Grady on the final count by only 182 votes, raised the possibility of a recount.

Compared to 2019, the 15.1 per cent 2024 turnout seems low - a measure of frustration perhaps, or dispute weariness, maybe simple resignation. The 2019 GS election came early in the pensions and 4-Fights disputes. Then Grady's campaign caught a mood not only for a struggle in HE but also for cutting through the factional divide. But the fall in participation is no collapse. 15.1 per cent is still higher than the turnout in the three previous GS elections (14.3 per cent in 2007; 12.8 per cent, 2012; 13.7 per cent, 2017). Interestingly, participation was also markedly higher than in recent GS elections in other unions: Unite's Sharon Graham was elected on a turnout of 10.3 per cent in 2021; GMB's Gary Smith on a 10 per cent turnout in 2021; PCS's Fran Heathcote on 11.5 per cent in 2023; and NEU's Daniel Kebede on 9 per cent in 2023. Participation in union elections is typically low. Comparatively, UCU performs rather well.

Secondly, unlike in 2019, this election was a four-person contest. Interestingly, there were two competing left candidates challenging Grady. It seems that at least some UCU left members had agreed to endorse the non-aligned Blake before UCU Left's Saira Weiner announced her candidacy. The point has been made elsewhere: the combined first-round vote for Weiner and Blake was 6,417 - higher than both Grady's 5,990 and McGaughey's 4,724. A credibly non-factional left candidate might well have achieved the highest first-round vote, eliminating McGaughey and possibly Grady on the second count. For UCU Left, however, Blake's factional independence was a weakness. On this view, being part of an 'organised collective' prevents the rightward slide of successful candidates; in short, union officers elected by the membership should be

subject to the protection of factional discipline. Without access to the ballot data, it's impossible to know how McGaughey's votes would have been redistributed as second-preferences; the final outcome, however, could well have been different. Perhaps surprisingly, only half of Weiner's votes (984) were second-preferenced to Blake, compared to 451 to Grady and 582 to McGaughey.

Thirdly, it's worth looking at the outcome in the light of anecdotal talk of people leaving UCU, due, if only in part, to the management of the HE disputes. In fact, the decline in membership since 2019 seems to have been modest judging by the number of ballots issued in 2019 (115,311) compared to 2024 (114,310). The difference of 1,000 may hide some membership churn: new members replacing old, membership lists cleaned up, the removal of non-paying members, but the perception remains. A UCU member recently retired from a non-academic post in a Russell Group university commented on how the near-100 per cent membership in her department had fallen drastically; it was nowhere near that now, she said.

Fourth, the published election data tells us nothing about the relative participation and the spread of preferences between the pre- and post-92 universities, among FE college branches and within community, prisons, adult and other sections of the post-16 system where UCU organises. How do we gauge these sectors? It's a fair observation that HE has dominated the internal argument in UCU: the USS in the pre-92s; Four Fights across the HE sector, despite a series of disputes and the national Respect FE campaign in the FE sector over a similar stretch of time. Is there anything in the comments of one FE college branch activist that she and others had voted for Grady after the hustings, and that '*most FE people*' she knew, '*were turned off by the others because they were too HE heavy*'? '*Although to be honest*', she added, '*no one talks much about it at college*'. Grady had been to the college, and was at least '*recognisable*'.

Recognisable or not, there is a view, quite widely held, that under Grady's leadership UCU simply hasn't delivered. Issues of contention include not only the management of HE disputes - timings, confusing information, cuts and runs - but also the role and authority of the union's decision-making structures. Navigating the competing accounts of what went wrong (if indeed that's the right way of looking at things), different views of what union democracy means or should mean formally or in practice, and keeping pace with the arguments, motions and meetings is difficult for members who

are not factionally engaged, conference habitues, or elected representatives. These issues are implicated in arguments about how and where decisions should be made - the relative powers of delegate conferences and e-ballots, neither with any formal constitutional function, the National Executive Committee, and the GS.

In her email to members following her re-election, Grady wrote that she would 'set out how I aim to implement my manifesto commitments and reflect on some of the key themes that were debated . . . during the election'; she was 'fully committed to listening to all perspectives', including from those who didn't vote for her, with the aim of uniting the membership. She would be sharing her 100 point plan covering 'areas such as equality, industrial strategy, recruitment, the forthcoming general election and legal work' and containing 'realistic actions' on issues members had raised with her as important.

On the face of it, this seems a fairly presidential proposition and sits oddly alongside Grady's advocacy of the approach favoured by Jane McAlevey (author of the widely influential union-organising manual *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*) centred on building union power through organic leaders and developing the base. In contrast, UCU's constitution clearly states that: 'the supreme policy making bodies of the Union' are the National Congress and Sector Conferences (16.1); the National Executive Committee is 'the principal executive committee of the Union . . . responsible for the execution of policy . . . between meetings of National Congress' (18.1).

Grady's manifesto is a challenge to the union's internal arrangements and inevitably to those who defend the formal position of the NEC on procedural grounds, and to those for whom formal structures are a key route to factional power. It's not uncommon, in trade unions and social movements alike, that small groups do exercise disproportionate influence through their control of formal structures. This is not specific to any particular grouping: caucuses and the hyper-committed occupying the limited spaces on committees and at conferences plus the use of factional slates are features of a long-established political tradition whereby competing groups set out to manage class and other social struggles.

Important here, then, is the tension between upholding formal democratic structures - committees, formal positions, conferences, mandated procedures - and developing an active

culture of member participation which typically does not fit nicely with those formal structures. Branch Delegate Conferences have no formal constitutional role in UCU but are arguably a closer reflection of evolving branch opinion than the annually elected NEC. What we mean by union democracy, and the differences between formal representative democracy, mobilising activist democracy, and evolving forms of participatory rank and file democracy is a matter that should be discussed.

What kind of rank and file?

A rank and file movement is not a mechanism for catapulting factional slates into regional and national positions. Capturing union positions is not exactly difficult given the low participation in elections for lay positions, and given also that most members have little interest in taking on the workload, whilst those who have are often turned off by the testiness and tedium these positions can involve.

That said, there are many tasks for rank and file activists to engage with, and scope for different people to be involved in different things.

First, we need to (re-)establish a culture of grassroots participation not just in union activity but in open discussion about the issues that affect us, the nature of our work, what has gone wrong, and what the future possibilities might be - a democratic culture that contests the decision-making entitlement of college and university managements, sector lead bodies and policy-making professionals. In FE, this means unlearning the habits of compliance and self-limitation into which teachers have been enculturated over the past 30 years and creating an environment, small to begin with, consistent with the vision of democratic education we aspire to.

Second, we need to deepen our democratic practice in ways that may or may not align with the formal union structures. Rank and file participation should not be conflated with factional success or measured mostly by the control of committees. A rank and file movement is not made of aspirant 'managers of the class' but of grassroots enablers of participation and initiative at sector, institutional and departmental levels. It means encouraging not factional discipline and factional divides but a culture of dissent and debate that can genuinely scrutinise and hold elected representatives and officials to account.
