It’s time for a change

The result of the UCU HE pay and equality ballot will be disappointing for many activists. 59% of members did not feel motivated to vote – a slightly higher proportion than in 2018. Effectively, 71% of HE members said No to strike action.

Branch activists deserve compliments for all the work put in. 41% is not a bad turn-out for a national industrial action ballot in the current climate. It’s almost the same as PCS got in 2018. But clearly a large majority of members could not be won to endorse action. Some, or all, of the following reasons are likely to have applied. Many members:

• join the union just as a form of insurance in case they have a problem at work, and not from any real understanding of trade union collective strength.

• don’t feel that the sacrifices to made would outweigh any benefits.

• feel they are doing OK anyway.

• are worried that their jobs could be on the line, through the financial position of their own institution.

The ballot result will certainly encourage some local managements to be more belligerent, on the basis that our members ‘aren’t up for a fight’. They should be politely but firmly disabused of such a misapprehension. The result is still a solid basis to build on which to build for local issues like jobs and conditions, where many of the above bullet points would not be so important.

We need to rethink the annual ritual of the HE pay dispute and ballot

One thing is clear: the annual ritual of the HE pay dispute and ballot is getting us nowhere fast. It’s arguable that we have squandered members’ goodwill and unnecessarily handed the employers a breathing space. Yes, the Tory Trade Union Act is now obstructing our ability to take action. But the USS strike ballots show that, when we get the issue right, the Act is no obstacle. We can smash the barriers and deliver devastatingly effective action – when we get the issue right and when it’s the right tactic. And, when we do so, we can also educate our members about the importance of not selling their labour power cheaply.

Our problem is not just the Trade Union Act, it’s the fact that the national bargaining machinery is under enormous strain. Marketisation has happened and it’s led to significant stratification and differentiation in our sector. Our employers use the vast differences in their resources to peg pay offers at the lowest possible point. They offer nothing at all on any other issue.

We have to change our tactics and it won’t be enough to rebrand our disputes as pay and equality or foreground casualisation or the gender pay gap because we think they mobilise members better. This is dangerously close to mis-selling if we know that the employers won’t engage on that terrain. Something has to change.

What is to be done?

Going back to absolute basics, our aim must be to build struggles on our campuses that take the fight to our employer, wresting concessions out of them, increasing the fighting confidence of members and building support at the same time for our alternative vision for education. But how do we do it?

It’s time for a pause and some proper strategic thinking. We have seen the union showing a lot of energy, but there’s not much evidence of strategy. These are not simple problems to solve. That’s why we need time to think and start a proper conversation in our branches.

Back in 2016, the Communist Party set out the case for doing things differently. We argued that our primary locus of power as a union is our workplaces. This is where members come face to face with exploitation and where they are driven into collective struggle. Strikes are critically important. They are a unique act of workplace defiance which shows up the exploitative reality in the employment reality. But the consciousness to be able to undertake this action must be built, it cannot be assumed. The experience of participation in collective workplace struggles, whether they involve strikes or not, builds collective fighting confidence and understanding of the need for deeper changes in workplaces and in society.

And we’ve seen examples of how this approach can work – not just the transformation of branches in the crucible of the USS strike but the patient strategic work of some of our branches, picking their battles, winning members’ confidence and building the capacity to then ballot for action on an a widely felt issue. And we know that we consistently win our local ballots because they are rooted in members’ concerns and because the action is directed at people with the power to change things.

We need a strategy that draws the maximum number of our members into struggles that they recognise to be meaningful, where they can see and win a tangible outcome, feel the power they bring to the table and feel their confidence in the union rise.

In the immediate term, the Communist Party proposes:

• Consultation with branches over a decision to build for a multi-year national pay claim to be lodged at JNCHES not before the 2020/21 pay round. Yet another ballot now, at a time when there is the possibility that one will be needed in the USS dispute would test the patience of many members and threaten to disengage many of them from the union;

• Work to ensure that more branches and local associations are engaged in pursuing local struggles around the national priority areas of the claim. Employers must feel that the cost of their unwillingness to engage nationally, will be the union targeting them locally;

• The development of strategies for targeting major employers and then spreading that success within all parts of our sector, including exploring ways to ensure that branches can materially support each other in these struggles;

• Major investment in the training and education of branches to be able to wage these local struggles. This must mean more than skills-based training, but must equip branch officers to analyse employers’ strategies in the HE market, employer power structures and finances, and really understand the way that marketisation has changed our employers. It’s not enough to denounce marketisation, we have to be able to exploit its contradictions. Finally, training and education must mean engaging with political economy and actively seeking to learn from collective knowledge and the history of our movement.

• Greater engagement with the Labour Party’s idea of a National Education Service. UCU’s policy calls for democratisation of our institutions and their return to the public sector. We should be developing now the concrete ideas for what a higher education sector of an NES should look like. This is how we will defeat marketisation – by playing our role in winning support for a coherent political vision of a higher education system that is truly at the service of the people as part of a project to renew Britain’s society and economy.