

**UCU Scottish Retired Members  
Chair's Report, Summer 2019**  
Terry Brotherstone, 3 June 2019

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The creation of a web presence for the UCU Scottish Retired Members Branch (UCUSRMB), for which we must thank Brian Martin, marks a significant moment for us. Our activities, policies and role in the union can now be more widely shared; we can improve communications with, and amongst, members; and, I hope, we can encourage more retired, and about-to-retire colleagues to join and feel able to participate in our work.

The months between the launch of the website and our next Annual General Meeting – scheduled for late November 2019 – have a special significance. The period since the (in a real sense, historic) USS pension strikes last year has, I think, seen a new mood in the union. Union membership has grown substantially. A new General Secretary, Jo Grady, has been elected. This is the first time a lay member rather than someone from the ranks of trade-union professionals. (How well this works in practice of course remains to be seen but I'm sure we will all, I'm sure, want to wish her, and the UCU HQ colleagues supporting her at Carlow Street well.) This year's congress in Harrogate was characterised by contributions from many first-time delegates, with great efforts being made to ensure business was conducted transparently rather than in a fog of acronyms, jargon and procedural opacity. There is to be a special conference in November – *one with some particular relevance to retired members* (see below) – to discuss the recommendations of UCU's 'Democracy Commission', which has been deliberating internal reforms.

As UCUSRMB chair, and current delegate to UCU Scotland Executive, I write here about some recent activities, hoping this may help create dialogue about our agenda leading up to the AGM and beyond it – into a period that will see new developments in the pensions dispute, the possibly realisation of the challenges to HE (and to society more generally) of so-called 'Brexit' and the unfolding of what may well be an unprecedented constitutional crisis in the United Kingdom. I believe that – in addition to whatever individual inputs our members may want to play in all these matters – the experience and intellectual talent our branch contains gives us the opportunity to play a particular *collective* role.

As I reported to our Committee meeting on 30 May in Edinburgh (UCU offices in Edinburgh and Glasgow are our usual venues but we have met in Dundee and in Stirling and would like to expand our horizons further), I have recently represented the branch at the Harrogate UCU Congress; at an important May Day symposium at Queen Margaret University on 'Trade Unions and Cooperatives: towards an alternative university'; at the Scottish TUC Palestine Solidarity Conference in April; and at various events arising from my role as UCU Retired Members delegate on Edinburgh Trades Union Council (ETUC).

## ***THE HARROGATE CONGRESS – THE DEMOCRACY OF UCU***

Last year's UK UCU congress hit the headlines by breaking up in disorder, necessitating a recall meeting to do the union's business. This year was quite different. The first full congress without Sally Hunt (sadly, I understand, in poor health), who, rather eerily, went almost entirely unmentioned – although in the new General Secretary (GS)'s speech her predecessor was an unspoken opposite – there was, for better or worse, a new mood. It was characterised by a certain triumphalism amongst UCU Left, following the surprising (to me anyway) election of a GS – not herself a UCU Left member but that grouping's second-choice candidate. With a few minor glitches, the three days in Harrogate went smoothly. There was a general sense of a union trying to sustain the impetus and spirit of the USS pensions strike.

UCUSRMB's motion had arrived (very marginally) 'late', so it was printed in the agenda but not taken. It concerned the anomalous fact – former AUT members will rally nostalgically to the cause of rectifying the anomaly – that UCU rules mean that retired members' branches can only submit motions to Congress, not Higher Education Sector Conference (HESC), so that – because USS pension matters are dealt with at HESC – we are in effect barred from contributing to policy-making on the scheme that provides most of our members' livelihood.

Our motion, as printed, however, was sympathetically discussed at the Retired Members' Meeting in Harrogate (which takes place at the same time as the morning session of HESC) where it gained support. We now need to decide on how best to use that support to ensure that this matter is addressed in the near future.

You can catch up on Congress and HESC at <https://www.ucu.org.uk/congresslive>. We will report back on it again – and on subsequent developments – at our AGM. In addition to deliberation on strategy and tactics in pursuit of a serious salary increase, the need to combat casualisation and promote equality and the defence of pensions, there were debates, *inter alia*, on campaigning against the rise of the far right, on fighting environmental destruction by securing a 'just transition' to a carbon-neutral, socially sustainable economy and on the recently divisive question gender recognition. On this last, contradictions emerged when, at HESC, a motion on 'Academic freedom to discuss sex and gender' (<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10091/Higher-Education-Sector-Conference#he32>) – which had been marked 'EP' (existing policy), and which, had I had a vote (and speaking for myself as we had not, at the time, had the chance as a branch to discuss it), I would have certainly supported – was rejected by 80 votes to 72 with 27 abstentions. Certainly an ongoing discussion and one, I believe, in which principles going well beyond the immediate issue are at stake.

There was controversy too during the discussions about the UCU Democracy Commission report – <https://www.ucu.org.uk/democracycommission> – seeking to redefine in practice the concept of a member-led union. 'Democracy' is of course a much-contested concept. Retired members' experience should have a part in this debate, which will take place more fully at a special conference on Friday 8 November. And one proposal – opposition to which resulted in something like a sit-down protest, led by FE members, at Harrogate – is of special interest to UCUSRMB. Contained in a motion (see <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10089/Democracy-commission-report-and-rule-changes#78>) from Southampton UCU, it was withdrawn. But the point for us to note is that it would have had the effect of disenfranchising our branch not simply from pensions debates but from Congress as a whole. The proposal was to change the qualification for a delegate to UK congress from 100 members per branch to 250. We currently have about 130. I confess to not having prepared myself for this debate, but – had it come to a decision-point – I would have tried to intervene. We need to be on the alert. I hope that our former UCU Scotland President, Ann Gow, who participated in the Commission's work, will come to a UCUSRMB committee meeting in August (which I hope we can make an open one) to explain more.

Even when things go smoothly Congress seldom completes its agenda-listed business. Amongst motions 'remitted' to Executive because they were timed out was one (<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10091/Higher-Education-Sector-Conference#he43>) on the recent Augar Report on tertiary education – see [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/805127/Review\\_of\\_post\\_18\\_education\\_and\\_funding.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf).

## THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



If the Augar Report (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-18-review-of-education-and-funding-independent-panel-report> and Mike Larkin's latest blog post [Augar stirs up the system: The ripples will go far beyond his remit](#) )

represents the most recent official animadversions on the this question – the latest attempt to rescue the English system particularly from the chaos created by New Labour, Coalition and Tory neoliberal policies – I believe that, as UCUSRMB, we can (and to some extent already do) contribute to an even more important, from-the-ranks discourse.

Retired members have already contributed to what might be called – after the review of governance that led to the Scottish Higher Education governance act of 2016 that has lifted a small corner of the curtain shielding HE managerialism from campus and public scrutiny – the von-Prondzynski process; and to a number of public conferences organised by UCUS Education Committee on the future of HE in Scotland that have helped inform that process. But while this not so long ago seemed a good deed in the naughty world of UK HE policy, a much

broader spirit of practical and forward-looking discussion is now evident and not only in Scotland. To pluck a few straws from the wind. At Harrogate, the think-tank, Class, launched *A New Vision for Further and Higher Education* (<http://classonline.org.uk/pubs/item/a-new-vision-for-further-and-higher-education>); on 30 May UCU Scotland hosted a seminar on UCU member Jeremy Valentine's Jimmy-Reid-Foundation pamphlet, *Neoliberalism and the New Institutional Politics of Universities* (<https://tinyurl.com/yymdqgqop>) and – along with Ann Henderson, former Scottish TUC Assistant Secretary who is now Rector of Edinburgh University – I recently spoke at a May Day conference at Queen Margaret University (QMU) on 'Trade Unions and Cooperatives: towards an alternative university'. Principal contributors were colleagues involved in setting up, as a going concern, the Cooperative University in England (<https://www.co-op.ac.uk/pages/category/co-operative-university>). I look forward to a report of the conference that we can circulate, since the intention of our QMU colleagues is to respond to the crisis at their own institution, not only by action (including their successful recent strike) to defend jobs but by going on the front foot and examining HE models that might supersede the neoliberal university. They are not saying cooperative model is necessarily the answer, only that its existence can help stimulate an urgent debate about new futures – one that must be both practical *and* visionary.

In anticipation of a report of the QMU conference, Sue Wright and Davydd Greenwood 'Universities run for, by, and with the faculty, students and staff: Alternatives to the neoliberal destruction of higher education' and other articles in vol. 10 (2017), issue 1 of *Learning and Teaching: 'Recreating Universities for the Public Good'* (<<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/latiss/10/1/latiss100104.xml>>) affords interesting reading.

## PALESTINIAN STUDENTS IN SCOTLAND

UCU Scotland supports – and UCUSRMB has donated to, and hosted beneficiaries of – SUSPS (Scottish Universities Supporting Palestinian Students (<<https://en-gb.facebook.com/ScottishUnisSupportPalestine/>>), a body that campaigns both for Scottish universities to waive fees so that qualified postgraduates from Palestine can study here for a one-year masters degree and for funds to support them while doing so. So far two students have successfully completed courses at QMU and one is currently studying at Aberdeen.

SUSPS, originally set up by UCU members, is now a Scottish TUC-supported initiative (as agreed at STUC Ayr and Inverness congresses in 2014 and 2016). Money has been raised from the Scottish Government, individuals, student fund-raisers, UCU Scotland and to some extent other unions. (For UCU support, see <<https://ucuscotland.wordpress.com/2015/06/04/scottish-universities-supporting-palestinian-students/>>.) If the scheme is to carry on, however, it needs sustained basic finance from this last source. From that point of view I attended a conference held on 24 April 2019 at the STUC HQ in Glasgow, which I hope will have prove to have been an important moment for SUSPS. Opened with an address from Dr Ibrahim Khadra on behalf of the Palestinian ambassador to the UK, it went on to hear from Manal Shqair, the SUSPS-supported student at Aberdeen – who spoke about the importance of Palestinian students being able to give first-hand reports on the occupation to Scottish students and others – and from Mahmoud Zwahre who has recently completed a PhD at Coventry University.

A session devoted to practical initiatives focused on SUSPS – addressed by Eurig Scandrett, then UCUS vice-president and me – and on the Fire Brigades Union, which has been hosting training for Palestinian firefighters with the Scottish Reserve Service and has already supplied a modern appliance to Palestine, with a second planned. The firefighters' spokesperson, Jim Malone spoke forcefully in support of Scottish unions financing SUSPS. In the afternoon implementing STUC policy of supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) in support of the cause of justice for Palestine more generally was discussed. Winding up the conference, Douglas Chalmers, President-elect of UCU, spoke about a recent visit to Palestine and on the way the Israeli government had dissolved the Palestine Education Authority and tried to dictate a new curriculum. A full report of the conference submitted to Edinburgh TUC can be supplied on request.

## **UCU, ETUC AND THE EIF**

UCU you know, ETUC is the Edinburgh Trades Union Council (formerly the Edinburgh Trades Council), to which we are affiliated and send a delegate, and EIF is the Edinburgh International Festival, in which ETUC has had a role since it was inaugurated in 1947 – and has a potentially enhanced and valuable part to play today. Through ETUC, UCUSRMB has an interest in supporting EIF from the point of view of encouraging unions to assist in its efforts to fulfil that part of its original mission which was to make internationally opera, music and theatre available to all.

In recent years ETUC, with union-contributed funds, has sponsored EIF events, including lectures (in the Festival themed around the World-War-I centenary by BBC war correspondents and National Union of Journalists members, Lyse Doucet and Orla Guerin; a performance by Equity, Musicians Union and UCU members about the early years as an Edinburgh-born trade unionist and socialist of the Irish revolutionary, James Connolly; and a semi-dramatised documentary presentation on the working-class Glasgow Unity Theatre who came uninvited to the first Festival in the hope of making it genuinely of and for the people.

Last year Scottish unions co-sponsored an afternoon of discussion under the title ‘Power, Gender and the Arts’ – a theme to be revisited at the Royal Lyceum Theatre on Saturday 24 August (<<https://lyceum.org.uk/.../power-gender-and-the-arts-edinburgh-international-festival>>). There is also a union initiative to further involve schoolteachers in the Festival and to work with Festival director, Fergus Linehan, on a new programming stream that will focus on the internationalism of the arts and greater social engagement with issues of concern to local people.

### **ALSO ... AND AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT**

This report is focused on matters, I hope of collective interest, in which I have had a particular concern. There will be much else reported elsewhere in these pages. Our branch makes many contributions to the union and to its wider social presence. Two of our members serve as UCU trustees; one represents us on more than one national pensioners’ body and reports regularly on these matters; another is involved in a European project concerned with HE standards; another still sustains an informative blog. We participate fully and discuss the concerns of the union as a whole and indeed seek to bring our wide range of experience to bear on how it conducts its affairs.

We would like to see the extent of individual experience represented at our meetings – and now on our website – expanded further so that it can contribute to our collective profile and inform our activities.

### **AND FINALLY ... THE DEMOCRACY OF UCU SCOTLAND**

As a branch we congratulate Carlo Morelli on his election as UCUS Hon President, and Janice Aitken on her re-election as Hon Secretary. But we also thank the defeated candidate Eurig Scandrett, who, as Vice-President (VP) of UCUS and Chair of UCUS Education Committee over the past two years, has shown active interest in our work; and it is perhaps regrettable that the rule-change necessitated when, over a decade ago, AUT Scotland morphed into UCUS ended the system under which the VP was also President-Elect. That way the Scottish union had a three-person, rolling leadership team, comprising VP, President and Immediate Past President, with a body of accumulated experience to draw on.

This is a situation I think we’d like to see revisited. UCU Scotland has a distinctive identity and this, I believe, it has allowed it sometimes to play an exemplary role in the union. The current rule gives precedence to the needs of the UK UCU National Executive (whose members are elected every two years and on which UCU Scotland is represented *ex officio* by its President and Secretary) over those of UCUS itself. And a further anomaly of very real concern to UCUSRMB is that – because the vote for Scottish President and Secretary is also one for our two UK UCU NEC members – retired members are denied the franchise. We cannot vote for our own Scottish President and Secretary. There are I think ways a rule revision could address this so that *all* UCU members in Scotland have a role in choosing UCUS President and I hope we can discuss this over the next few months.