

# UCU Congress / HE Conference 2023 Report

(Roddy Slorach & Jonathan Pinto)

This was the first in-person annual Congress since 2019, taking place over 3 days in Glasgow. The UCU's supreme decision-making body was attended by around 300 branch delegates from every post-16 sector. This comprised two days of Congress and one day for HE and FE sector conferences.

We both found the event a gruelling experience, Each day's proceedings started at 9am and finished after 6pm, with the only break an hour for lunch, which was itself packed with various (official and unofficial) fringe meetings. Frustratingly, Congress coincided with 3 rare days of Glasgow sunshine!

Contrary to some reports on social media, it's important to stress that the main debates were conducted in a respectful manner, and that the overall mood among Congress delegates was one of unity and pride in our achievements over the last year – a theme emphasised by the General Secretary in her opening address.

A large majority of motions submitted were passed overwhelmingly by Congress / HE conference. In most cases, our branch did not have an existing view on a given motion, so we used our judgement based on hearing the debates. In almost every instance, however, we both voted for motions in line with these large majority decisions. Given the huge number of motions debated, we thought it best to highlight only those where our votes may have been contentious or were dictated by clearly expressed branch mandates.

The final agenda, including motions we refer to except those which were submitted late, is here: [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/13804/Congress-agenda/pdf/AGENDA\\_Motions\\_and\\_SOs.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/13804/Congress-agenda/pdf/AGENDA_Motions_and_SOs.pdf)

## Congress

The first day began with a report from and challenges to the Congress Business Committee. As usual, the agenda was altered somewhat by the outcome of various votes on these matters, including the submission of emergency motions. Given the reported volume of business, Congress voted to limit proposing speeches to 3 minutes and all other speeches in debate to 2 minutes. An attempt to exclude discussion of Motions 28 and 29 (see below) on legal grounds was overwhelmingly lost – providing an early indication of the mood of delegates.

The most controversial motions passed concerned the war in Ukraine and censure of the General Secretary. These were also the areas where the sharpest disagreements were expressed.

## Censure of the GS

On Saturday, Congress voted to formally criticise (to 'censure') the General Secretary over her interventions in the HE dispute. Delegates focused on the actions of the General Secretary - the repeated undermining of HE disputes by pausing strike action at crucial moments, ignoring HEC decisions and excluding democratically elected negotiators from vital decisions.

This composite<sup>i</sup> censure motion (No. 28), passed by a margin of 52% to 39%. **Our branch was one of several which had passed a similar motion, so we both voted for Motion 28.** The more serious motion of 'no confidence' (No. 29) fell by 27 votes. **Imperial UCU had not discussed the issue, so we abstained on Motion 29.**

Both motions were grouped together as one debate. Once this was over and just prior to the vote, the General Secretary was allowed a 12-minute right to reply. She conceded that some mistakes had been

made but did not explicitly apologise for them. Further, she emphasised the need for unity against our employers, but also added that in her view much of the criticism of her was motivated by misogyny. We saw no evidence of this misogyny in either the motions or debates (including in our own branch).

### **Ukraine war**

The sharp and thorough debate on Ukraine grouped together two motions. Motions 5 and 6 both opposed the Russian invasion, demanded that Russian troops leave, condemned all imperialism, and called for peace. Motion 5 called for the UK government to cease sending arms to Ukraine, opposed the expansion of NATO and called on UCU to support protests called by the Stop the War Coalition and CND. Motion 6 called for UCU to campaign for safe routes for all refugees and asylum seekers, for the cancellation of Ukraine's national debt, and for UCU to develop projects supporting practical solidarity work.

Congress was narrowly persuaded by the argument that the war in Ukraine is escalating and poses an increasing global threat. The death toll is already in the tens of thousands among Ukrainian and Russians alike. More high-tech weapons are being deployed on both sides, supplied by a growing number of other countries, and increasing the risk of nuclear conflict. Motion 5 was passed by 130 votes to 121 (with 28 abstentions). An amendment calling for more UK arms for Ukraine fell by 146 votes to 113. **We both abstained in the votes on Motion 5 but voted for Motion 6 (which was passed overwhelmingly).**

### **Industrial action**

Congress and both sector conferences voted in support of local and national strike committees as the best means for members to ensure control over the conduct of industrial action. **In line with previous branch votes and most delegates, we voted for all such motions. Given previous branch voting on the issue, however, we voted against Motion 68, which proposed indefinite strike action as "the most effective way to win" industrial disputes.** This motion was, however, passed by a large majority of delegates.

### **Democracy**

There were several motions debated at both Congress and HE Conference in relation to improving or defending UCU democracy. Motion 25, passed by a significant majority, removed the cap on fighting fund payments in relation to the Marking and Assessment Boycott. A motion which argued that electronic surveys and polls were either superior or should be used in addition to other forms of decision-making was rejected by a large majority, primarily because we saw how such e-polls were misused in the HE disputes. **We both voted against Motion 69.**

### **Conduct of members**

Congress 2022 set up a committee to review Rule 13, a procedure to deal with complaints against members, in response to concerns about fairness. This Congress adopted a procedure establishing a new body, the Conduct of Members Committee, to deal with such complaints. The effect is to increase lay member involvement in internal processes that were formerly highly centralised.

### **Students**

Congress agreed to rule changes allowing postgraduate research students ('PGRs') to become UCU members on an equal basis to staff, even if not employed at the time. We were alerted to some thorny related issues – eg, access to legal support and industrial action ballots (student members have no

vote in formal industrial action ballots) – but these were not considered decisive and we were among the large majority of delegates who saw the principle of inclusion as paramount.

Among the late motions discussed was L5 on the rights of international students, which was passed by an overwhelming majority.

### **Equality**

Congress reaffirmed UCU's commitment to trans and non-binary solidarity and LGBT+ rights. It also supported proposals on sex workers' rights, and sexual and gender-based violence training, including in the internal UCU complaints procedure. Various motions on disability advocacy and support were also passed by a large majority, including supporting disabled students and campaigning against Cost of Living and cuts in disability entitlements. **We are aware of differences of opinion among branch activists over some of these issues, and believe we represented the majority view in supporting all these motions.**

A motion on reparations for slavery, which had fallen off the agenda last year, was supported overwhelmingly. Congress also voted to campaign against new far right extremist groups who have been given confidence to attack refugees by the Government's scapegoating (Roddy had an emotional reunion with an old friend who spoke of her community role in resisting such attacks in nearby Erskine at a Stand Up To Racism fringe meeting).

### **Solidarity with UEA and Brighton branches**

Congress unanimously passed motions of solidarity with two branches currently facing serious redundancy threats – University of East Anglia and University of Brighton.

We heard that the attack at Brighton University, involving the threat to over 100 academic jobs, was also a deliberate assault on the UCU branch there. Four members of the branch committee are 'at risk', including the Chair who was also recently re-elected to the union's NEC. Congress agreed that the campaign at Brighton should be declared 'a local dispute of national significance', with the branch provided with all resources available. Branches in London and the South East are asked to send delegations, with their branch banners, to the **'Save Brighton University – No to mass redundancies' demonstration called by Brighton UCU on Saturday 10th June.**

### **Higher Education Sector Conference**

Higher Education Sector Conference voted for a long rebalot over the summer in both the Four Fights and USS disputes, as the existing mandate runs out in September.

Delegates at both HE and FE sector conferences also voted to encourage branches to call strike committees if they had not done so already, and to call a UK-wide strike committee in HE disputes. This would aim to "increase members' involvement and participation in building disputes and [shape] their direction." Delegates should be elected from every striking (or MABing) branch and meet regularly while action is being taken. **We both voted in favour of HE12, which was passed by a large majority.**

**We abstained on HE16 (passed) calling for further exploration of Conditional Indexation in USS and voted for (with a large majority of delegates) HE18, supporting legal action against USS.**

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<sup>i</sup> A composite motion is a time-saving device bringing together the content when similar motions are submitted from a number of branches