

Unison Higher Education Service Group Conference – Thursday 2nd February 2023

A group of us from the University of Brighton headed up to Newcastle on the train to attend the Higher Education Service Group Conference that was being held in the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Newcastle. There was me and Lee Christien who were the delegates and Steve who was a visitor. Ivan Bonsell was also in attendance as well as Sarah Pickett in their unison roles. This was my first time being a delegate and meant that we could vote on the various motions that were being debated, which was quite exciting. We had been sent our conference packs several weeks ago which contained our conference pass, the annual report, conference agenda and guide and the green cardboard square with a hand on, that we used to vote.

In our role as delegates, one of the delegates needed to pick up the voting cards the day before which I did. The voting cards may have been needed in case one of the motions, went to the voting cards instead of the normal vote. There was talk that we would likely not have to use the voting cards, and this turned out to be correct.

The conference started at 9.30am and there were 12 motions to be debated which included a One-off Payment for University Staff, Aggregate the ballot, Conversion Therapy – spread the word and Trial a 4 day working week. The person introducing the motion, was given 5 minutes to speak and people could put forward for and against arguments which could last up to 3 minutes. Our role as delegates was to listen to the for and against arguments and then to vote accordingly. The chair would say those in favour and those against and our job was to hold up the green voting hands when we wanted to agree or disagree with a motion. Most of the motions was passed and it was quite straight forward. The Conversion Therapy motion did lead to some emotional statements from delegates and was passed.

The main motion that was controversial was the motion to aggregate the ballot. There were lots of speakers against aggregating the ballot, including my fellow delegate, Lee Christien. The main issue was that only 22 out of 145 UK Higher Education Institutions have been taking industrial action for the 22/23 pay round. The speaker who brought the motion and a couple of other fellow speakers suggested that by aggregating the ballot, this figure could be increased, and we could get a 50% turnout. However, there were lots of counter points saying that with only 22 out of 145 opting to strike, although aggregating the ballot is a great idea, unison is not ready or strong enough for that yet and if we were to aggregate the ballot, then it could result in no one striking as 50% opting to strike would be a very hard figure to get to at this moment in time. After all the speakers have said their piece and put forward good arguments for and against, the motion was not passed, and the ballot will remain not aggregated for the moment and left to the branches to ballot their members.

Other highlights of the conference were the Labour MP, Shadow Minister for Higher Education, Matt Western, who gave a half hour talk and answered questions and our very own Ivan Bonsell and Sarah Pickett giving speeches.

Leonie Moore

Delegate Report on Higher Education Service Group Conference, Newcastle, 2 February 2023.

I am pleased to report back to the branch as one of the delegation team whom attended Unison's annual Higher Education Service Group Conference held this year in Newcastle. A contingent of members made the trip from the University of Brighton (UOB) to attend the

conference. As well as participating in the main business of conference, members attended seminars, meetings, and networked with fellow attendees.

A number also showed solidarity with striking civil servants, firefighters, teachers, train workers and University staff by attending a large rally held in the centre of the city the day before the conference.

During conference, we joined delegates drawn from across Unison HE Branches throughout the UK to come together for this productive event. It was a lively and inspiring day that highlighted, for me, the importance of celebrating and recognising the diligent work members do to run our inclusive and democratic institution which is legally tasked with fighting for fair pay and conditions.

This is most clearly illustrated by conference's unanimous call to, first, produce a joint claim for a consolidated pay award at the flat rate of £4,000, in addition to any short fall employers are legally required to meet under the government's minimum wage level. Second, to work jointly through employer and union action to eliminate gender and ethnicity pay gaps. Third, to achieve National agreements to reduce precarious employment in Higher Education and bring outsourced workers in the sector back into direct university employment.

Jon Richards, Assistant General Secretary, delivered a speech welcoming delegates and visitors to conference as it returned to an in-person format for the first time since the pandemic. Richards highlighted the current challenges facing the HE sector and the positive role the Trade Union movement takes in representing their members interests against the threat of more repressive government legislation, especially in light of the Bill currently being drawn up against organized workers at the time of writing.

Mobina Begum, chair of the Higher Education Service Group Executive (SGE), elaborated on the challenges facing university support staff by drawing attention to their falling rate of pay during an ever-worsening cost of living crisis. Begum noted the damage that poverty pay causes for workers within the sector as well as for the students who see the effects of employee burnout.

The annual report by the SEG outlined in detail all the work undertaken by the union across its regional branches to challenge this situation, and was passed unanimously by conference.

Keynote

The keynote speech was given by Matt Western, Labour MP and Shadow Higher Education Minister, who praised Unison at conference for their campaigning work and efforts to increase pay and improve conditions for all HE workers in the face of the Conservative Government's persistent economic mismanagement and ruinous disregard for the sector. Western stated Labour's pledge —if in government which he hoped could be achieved by 2024/25— to repeal the repressive anti-trade union laws currently being drafted and proposed by the current Conservative Government.

Western noted that the democratic right to take industrial action by workers was a fundamental human right. Such an attack, he pondered, illustrated the dangerousness of a weak Government that is wildly spinning out of control.

During a question and answer session with the MP, a delegate from Leeds University eloquently asked of the Shadow Minister “why should Transgendered Trade Unionists vote for Labour in light of its leaderships unclear stance on Trans Rights?” Conference was left feeling even less clear on what exactly Labour’s position on Trans Rights is after Western’s response which failed to adequately answer or even simply address the question directly.

Overall, Western’s speech included examples which illustrated and aligned with the union’s view that poverty is often a result of poor policy choice by powerful groups and vested interests. A cogent reminder of the importance of workers to effectively and democratically organize against such vested interest. It also was a reminder of how the union’s work to advocate for the rights of all workers to be free from marginalization, discrimination, and bigotry is an ongoing struggle which members of the working class are yet again inspirationally leading the way on.

Motions and Amendments

Throughout the day, eleven motions were debated and voted on by conference delegates.

Mobina Begum, SEG Chair, updated delegates on the fast-moving developments in the negotiations surrounding Unison’s open pay dispute with the University and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). Unison’s pay claim for 2022/23 continues to remain a live issue, acknowledged as such by UCEA through their welcome decision to call for an earlier than usual start to the 2023/24 pay round.

Later, Begum also outlined the pay demands for 2023/24 in an emergency motion responding to this year’s earlier pay round and the ongoing dispute for 2022/23. It was passed unanimously by conference.

Some examples of the other key motions put to conference which were carried include:

- From Leeds University, a call for the SGE to enter into a one-off extraordinary negotiation with the employer outside of the normal pay negotiation cycle for a non-consolidated payment to all staff.

- From the Northern Region, a call for the union to serve —where deemed appropriate by the SGE— Freedom of Information requests on bonuses, expenses, travel, private healthcare etc. To then collate and share this information with regions and branches for use in our campaigns over pay and conditions.

- From the National Young Members’ Forum, a call to work to improve work/life balance by building awareness and promoting the ‘Right to Disconnect’ campaign.

- From the National Disabled Members Committee, a set of practical measures to secure the legacy of the ‘Year of the Disabled Workers in HE Work Places’ 2022 campaign.

- From Cymru/Wales Region, a call for the SGE to ensure that the lowest spine point in negotiations with the new Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff

(JNCHES) is above the Real Living Wage, and to ensure that no spine points are reduced as a result.

- From the National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender plus Committee, a call for conversion therapy to be added to the safeguarding policies of all HE institutions. Sarah Picket from UOB as a platform speaker provided a moving argument in support of the motion highlighting the vital role Trade Union's have in progressing equal rights.

- From Hull University, a call for universities to engage with existing 4-day work week trials. A delegate from Kent University while agreeing in principle spoke against the motion questioning the timing of the motion in light of the open pay dispute.

-As a platform speaker for SGE, Ivan Bonsell, UOB Branch Secretary, addressed a receptive conference with a welcomed call for the continued campaign for all universities across the UK to pay their workforces properly, and yet also to importantly recognise that not all universities are in a strong financial position –a result of the imposed and in-effective model which pits institution against institution rather than working in a co-operative, detailed, and productive manner. The motion sets out the need for the union to oppose the marketisation of HE which has caused inevitable winners and losers. The motion aims to address this situation by, first, campaigning for a fully funded co-operative and integrated HE model that eliminates the needless wasteful and destructive competition that undermines students, staff, and indeed, the very role and business of serious universities. Second, to campaign for struggling universities to receive the funding to stay afloat, and to avoid the terrible effects of an institution failing on jobs, students, and the wider community. Third, to campaign for a free education system and end to all tuition fees for all UK domiciled students. Fourth, to draw up a campaigning plan to assist branches which face the likely prospect of institutional collapse.

Opposed

A motion put forward by the University of West of England which called for all future ballots on pay to be aggregated was the only motion opposed by conference. The motion caused the biggest debate of the day with a number of delegates speaking for, but a greater number speaking against. As a delegate for UOB, I spoke against the motion in-line with our branches previous approach to the issue. While an aggregated ballot would be the ideal preference and desired goal, the option for disaggregated ballots has clearly opened the door for effective national bargaining as a result of the current pay dispute negotiations.

Conclusion

Conference ended with a call for solidarity with the HE workers at the University of East Anglia, who it was revealed, are facing a large number of redundancies and funding cuts to their institution. It was a stark reminder of the situation facing all HE staff which made the passing of the final motion all the more relevant.

So, let's continue to encourage our colleagues to join Unison and help us fight to improve our sector together on all of the key issues facing university support workers.

The call from this year's conference is clear, let's continue to build the campaign to transform our workplaces from this broken model to one that is fully funded, inclusive, and genuinely works for the benefit of all

Lee Christien