

Sheffield UCU Extra Ordinary General Meeting Minutes Thurs 9th July 2020

via Zoom

Chair: Robyn Orfitelli, Branch Vice President

Minutes: Jane Rodger, Branch Administrator

1. Introduction and welcome

- 1.1. Robyn welcomed all to the meeting
- 1.2. Since March the campus trade unions have been meeting regularly with HR to discuss the University's response to the covid-19 pandemic. This has included health and safety, workload, furlough, teaching online, fixed term contracts, casually engaged staff and the financial situation. Throughout, the unions have pushed the University to resist knee jerk reactions and to focus on staff and students as priorities.
- 1.3. We have been told by the Employer to expect information today about a s188 notice. This is a process that an Employer must use when considering contractual job changes, including but not limited to compulsory and/or voluntary redundancies. A ninety day consultation period will follow. The University says that compulsory redundancies are not within the scope of this S188, and that their goal is to use the process to avoid compulsory redundancies. The SUCU position is that all possible measures of avoidance should have been considered before entering into any s188 process. SUCU will fight any detrimental employment terms and any potential future job losses, and we need member help to do this. We need Departmental Reps, Health and Safety Reps and Personal Caseworkers. We are not convinced that the University has fulfilled its duty in terms of due diligence, and we have requested the financial information to interrogate.

2. Motion - SUCU response to Covid-19 job cuts and losses

- 2.1. The proposed motion:

Branch notes:

- that the University of Sheffield has already put in place drastic measures as a response to the financial uncertainties of Covid-19, leading to job cuts across the institution
- that the University is in a relatively strong financial position
- that outcomes around student recruitment for either 2020/21 or 2021/22 are not yet known
- that staff have worked under hugely difficult conditions for the last four months in an uncertain and anxious environment

Branch resolves

- to develop a 'jobs first' claim with the other campus unions that requires the University to fulfil its obligations to cut costs elsewhere before cutting the staff bill, and to enter into dispute should that not transpire
- to continue to support casualised colleagues, including through encouraging open-ended staff to not agree to changes that make their workloads unmanageable and unreasonable

- to work with the Students' Union on campaigning to ensure that neither staff nor students will experience detrimental or unsafe conditions at the start of next academic year

The motion was proposed by Sarah Staniland on behalf of SUCU Committee and was seconded from the floor. The proposer spoke in favour of the motion and gave background.

2.2. Discussion included:

- Can we include a long term aim to reduce the University's carbon footprint by not relying heavily on international students in the claim?
Ans. The details of the claim will be developed in consultation with members.
- Can we ask that recently advertised jobs are saved for people being made redundant?
Ans. The new jobs have already been raised with University management. The unions have said this amounts to a dereliction of duty - to put money into a project and divert it away from core University business. This could also form part of the claim - to ensure the focus is on saving existing jobs.
- There was a discussion about the potential Government bail out.

A vote was taken on the motion which was carried by a majority of 96% in favour, none against, and 4% abstentions.

3. Motion - UCU Fighting Fund levy

3.1. The proposed motion:

SUCU notes:

- the shortfall in the national Fighting Fund, which is currently unable to meet the existing call for strike pay support emerging from the 2019 and 2020 strikes, and the flat rate levy on most members announced recently to meet that shortfall
- the previous transfer of £1M from other national funds to the national Fighting Fund
- the assertion by national officers that existing rules prevent further transfers of cash from national reserves to meet this shortfall, but also notes the challenges to that assertion
- the request from HQ for branches with substantial reserves to donate up to 20% of these funds to help address this shortfall
- the still substantial reserves in SUCU's branch funds even following our local Hardship Fund subventions

SUCU resolves:

1. to donate 20% of our local branch reserves to the national Fighting Fund, as requested
2. to request that any donated funds from branches and individual members received after the announcement of the levy be matched, pound for pound, with funds from UCU reserves
3. to reimburse from local funds the cost of the levy to members who request it

The motion was proposed by Pablo Stern on behalf of SUCU Committee, and seconded from the floor. The proposer spoke in favour of the motion and gave background.

3.1. Discussion included:

- If we went into dispute where would members get financial help?

Ans. Members can still claim from the National Fighting Fund and the local Branch has healthy net cash reserves.

A vote was taken on the motion which was carried by a majority of 89% in favour. 2% voted against and there were 9% abstentions.

4. Any other business

- 4.1. A member from the floor raised the situation for PhD students who do not have access to extensions, as they are externally funded. This disproportionately affects international students. SUCU has been campaigning about this matter and we welcome more member involvement. International staff and students are facing unique challenges. The UCU NEC has produced guidance for international students but there is much more that needs to be done to coordinate this. Locally we are working with the Student Union to help Post Graduate Researchers and there is an active group of PGRs who have written an open letter. There is also a local PGR whatsapp group. A webinar is planned for the 23rd July to focus on Graduate Teaching Assistant issues. Underlying the discussion is also the distinction between paid and unpaid research labour.
- 4.2. There was a suggestion from the floor that Senior University Management should take a voluntary pay cut. This is part of the SUCU campaign and there are a number of member led open letters calling for this.
- 4.3. An all campus union member meeting will be held tomorrow Friday 10th July at 1pm.