

SUCU General Meeting Minutes Tues 24 November 2020, 1pm

Via zoom

Chair: Sarah Staniland, Branch President

Minutes: Jane Rodger, Branch Administrator

1. Welcome and introductions
Sarah Staniland welcomed all to the zoom meeting.
2. Minutes of the last meeting
The minutes of the previous [General Meeting held 15.10.20](#) were approved.
3. Grievance update
 - 3.1. We held an Emergency General Meeting on the 4th October where over 350 members voted in favour of supporting a formal campus union grievance regarding face to face working safety concerns during the covid-19 pandemic. SUCU entered into the grievance process with Unite and GMB calling on the University to suspend non essential face to face work until it is safe. The campus unions have met with the University management four times seeking a resolution. Since the grievance was submitted there has been some progress in the discussions, and there have been many changes in the pandemic situation, such as a second national lockdown. The specific H&S concerns raised by Unite have been resolved and some of the unions' recommendations have been accepted by management. We remain concerned that systemic problems continue, such as the need for a site-specific database that includes risk assessments. Changes to the national picture include Government guidance to suspend face to face teaching in December, and the introduction of mass testing for students prior to Christmas and up to Easter.
 - 3.2. Campus unions have suggested to management that a focus on discussing what happens next term could bring the grievance to an end. We have had a formal notification from HR which we have responded to and we await a reply to this.
 - 3.3. Comments and questions from the floor included:
 - We have seen some signs that risk assessments are now being collated.
4. Health and safety update
 - 4.1. Recent discussions have focussed on plans for mass testing of students which we understand will take place in the Octagon, and volunteers to help are being sought. The University says they are following the Department of Health and Social Care guidance. Our immediate concerns are that the message that this will give people "peace of mind" is misleading as we understand there are a significant number of false negative results with the particular type of test being used. We have asked for this wording to be removed from the webpage. Also, we hope that the information given to students when they are tested reinforces this.
 - 4.2. Stress and wellbeing concerns are being brought up numerous times a week by the campus unions. We are pushing for the University to make workload adjustments and

to use effective stress risk management. We understand that the Faculty of Social Science are offering wellbeing sessions and whilst these do not cure the problem we have asked that these are offered in the other Faculties too. The staff survey for return to campus working has been discussed but we have not been given the results. We have suggested to management that we need more acknowledgement from them of how difficult this semester has been.

4.3. Comments and questions from the floor included:

- Will the mass testing program increase the risk of transmission on campus?
Ans. We do not know exactly what the plans are, but we expect appointment slots and queue management. Keep us informed if you know of any concerns.
- Are we expecting the scheme to be extended to staff?
Ans. Possibly but we do not have details.
- Everyone is exhausted and yet more work is being given such as new curriculum development. What work does the University want us to not do?
Ans. The best approach to push back on workload is for as many people as possible to write to their line managers and ask what their strategy is to reduce your workload stress. Managers are responsible for this.
- We are moving from a “do what you can” approach to “business as usual” to even more business than usual. We have lost staff, there are staff on short contracts, cumbersome internal bureaucracy prevents any spending and this amounts to an untenable situation.
- Line managers are also overwhelmed. The problem lies with central university policy. Managers are hitting a brick wall.
Ans. Managers actually need the evidence from staff to enable them to push back up the hierarchy and to the centre. We need to think of our Managers as our allies and it is ok to approach them in a friendly manner as many are sympathetic. Members are encouraged to ask their line managers to push the issue up on their behalf.
- We have recruited more H&S reps and we want to increase the number further. A key priority area for the Branch is stress and workload.
- The real need is for extra staff. We understand that there was a University Executive Board Awayday last week but we are not aware of any assurances about staff recruitment.

5. Legal approaches to the pandemic

5.1. Jess Meacham proposed the following motion on behalf of SUCU Committee and gave background. The motion was seconded from the floor. Sheffield UCU was contacted by Liverpool Branch along with a number of other large Branches seeking funds for legal opinion on the H&S context of face to face teaching, and possible actions. This would be a slightly different approach to the advice provided by UCU national office on face to face working. The legal opinion would be used to develop resources for members and Branches.

Branch resolves:

To contribute £1000 to the cost of seeking a legal opinion on aspects of health and safety that might protect higher education workers during the pandemic.

5.2. Comments and questions from the floor included:

- What impact would this have on Branch funds?
Ans. Branch funds are healthy.

5.3. A vote was taken and the motion was carried (94% in favour, 3% against and 3% abstentions).

6. National updates

- 6.1. Sam Marsh gave an update regarding the USS pension dispute. He proposed the following motion on behalf of SUCU Committee, which if passed would be submitted to the recently called Higher Education Sector Conference scheduled for the 15th December. The motion was seconded from the floor. This Conference replaces the HE element of the postponed UCU Congress which had been scheduled for October but was cancelled. Universities UK has now sent its response to the USS valuation. The valuation would mean huge increases in contribution rates. This would be a disaster if the figures were believed, but the Employers do not. The University of Sheffield has also released its response to the consultation. The Employers have worked well with UCU. In addition to the valuation, there is a side issue with regard to the strength of the covenant. Employers are reluctant to sign up to the support measures. The USS Board is meeting today and again on the 11th December at which point we expect to hear the final valuation figures.
- 6.2. The proposed motion marks a call for a new UCU policy towards the USS dispute, that is, a slight rowing back from no detriment. This fills a vacuum in UCU policy.

Title: No solid basis for a resolution over USS

Conference notes the consultation response from Universities UK published on 13 November which shows deep dissatisfaction among our employers for USS's approach to the 2020 valuation, with many criticisms echoing those made by UCU.

Conference believes that the dispute over the future of scheme will only be resolved through constructive negotiation over a valuation outcome that all parties can trust, and that the valuation that was sent for consultation with employers falls far short of this.

Conference calls on the General Secretary to write to Universities UK, USS and the Pensions Regulator articulating this point and making it clear that the pre-92 sector is heading towards a crisis caused by a failure by USS to deliver a valuation that commands trust and provides a sound basis for negotiation.

(128 words)

- 6.3. Comments and questions from the floor included
- We have been working for years to get the Employers to work with us. If they are now on the same side, how do we proceed?
Ans. There is strong political pressure that could be brought to bear if we work with UUK. This matter may also end up in the Courts.
 - What other forms of leverage are there with USS, such as a public campaign and direct action?
Ans. This is worth thinking about, such as a petition.
 - Is there a risk of losing the no detriment policy?
Ans. This motion does not contradict this, but it makes it clear that no detriment is not the only issue.
- 6.4. The following amendment was proposed and seconded from the floor:
Add to the final sentence: "and calls on the HEC to develop a pressure campaign to effect change".
- 6.5. Comments and questions from the floor included:

- Any motion will go to HESC for interpretation.
- 6.6. A vote was taken on the proposed amendment which was carried (68% for, 8% against and 24% abstentions).
- 6.7. A vote was taken and the proposed motion as amended (below) was carried (89% for, 1% against and 10% abstentions).

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(141 words)

7. AOB

- 7.1. The rescheduling of Congress has meant that some of our already agreed delegates cannot attend. We will discuss this further at Committee and report back, but members are encouraged to get in touch if they are interested in attending.
- 7.2. Members are encouraged to engage with the events organised to mark Disability History month.
- 7.3. A member asked about lecture capture. It was confirmed that we have an agreement with the University, that lecture content can only be used for the current cohort of students. The University owns the intellectual property, but the lecturer owns the performance rights. At the beginning of the pandemic the University agreed that anything done this year would be just a temporary change. One of our priorities for 2021 is to start the unravelling.