

**SUCU Extraordinary General Meeting, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

**Room K , Hicks Building**

**Chair: Jon Benson, SUCU Vice President**

**Minutes: Jane Rodger, Branch Administrator**

1. Welcome and introductions

Jon Benson welcomed all members to the meeting. This meeting has been requisitioned by 50 members of the branch to discuss a motion defending the right to peaceful protest and protecting the city environment.

2. Motion

2.1. Jon invited Richard Ward to speak for 10 minutes in support of the motion he has proposed, and is seconded by Jules Alexandrou and Julian Crockford. Richard explained that the issues surrounding this are very involved, but are very much linked to a 25 year Private Finance Initiative (PFI). The campaign does not object to street repairs and maintenance. The objection is to the damage being caused to street trees. Since the decision about the urban trees was made by the Sheffield City Council there have been sustained protests across the city, and significant sums have been raised to defend the civil and criminal actions against protesters. Real and credible experts have said they do not support what Sheffield City Council are doing. The Trees for Cities charity have independently reached the view they could not work with the Council due to the way decisions were being made for example the absence of a cost benefit analysis. Another concern is the lack of public accountability and transparency which is symptomatic of the use of PFI contracts. Much of the contract between the Council and Amey Plc was redacted and therefore could not be open to scrutiny. Other local authorities would have retained the trees although it is accepted that some do need to be felled. Despite protesters trying to slow down the felling of the urban trees Amey are on schedule with this aspect of the contract. Anti-trade union legislation has been used to suppress peaceful protest and seventeen protesters went to the High Court in Leeds and were issued with formal threats, that unless they signed a commitment to cease certain activities they would be served with injunctions. Due to fear of repercussions nine people signed this repressive agreement that removed their individual rights. Eight protesters remain and will stand trial this week.

2.2. Questions and comments from the floor included:

- A key point to make is that this is not about a small group of protesters – there is widespread support for the campaign across the city.
- Injunctions have also been issued against “persons unknown”, which effectively removes the right to protest.  
Ans. The court case will be pivotal.
- This motion should be endorsed by the Branch as this is a major attack on democracy in the City. Over the years the Council has consistently protected the interests of private business. As UCU we should defend the right to protest as the assaults will continue. We are also facing a climatic and economic crisis so there is no better time to make a stand now.
- The motion seems to be about two issues: firstly, the tree felling and how Amey Plc operates; and secondly the removal of the right to protest.

Ans. Democracy and the right to protest are the issues behind the matter of the trees. These rights were hard won.

- It was proposed that a branch donation of up to £200 is made to the legal fund for STAG. An advisory vote for a Committee decision was taken and all but one person were in favour of the suggested donation. One person abstained.
- An amendment to reorder the motion resolutions was proposed. Richard (the motion proposer) accepted the amendment.
- An amendment to include “long term” in 3C was proposed, and this was also accepted.
- An amendment to include “dangerous” in A was proposed.  
Ans. The term would be abused, as the key issue is proportionate risk management. The proposer of the amendment agreed to withdraw the amendment.
- An amendment to call on the Vice Chancellor to make a statement was proposed.  
Ans. There are issues of academic freedom, but a call on the VC could be a separate initiative to the motion. The amendment was withdrawn.
- We should contact the Green Initiative within the University.

A vote was taken on the amended motion below which was passed nem con.

## **Motion from University of Sheffield UCU on Defending the Right to Peaceful Protest and Protecting the City Environment**

### **1. This Branch notes:**

A. The £2.2 billion Private Finance Initiative (PFI ) project ‘Streets Ahead’ that Sheffield City Council has entered into for a period of 25 years, commencing 2012.

B. That some of the greatest positive social changes achieved in our society have been underscored by both sustained organised, peaceful, legitimate protest and the actions of individuals, the Trade Union movement, as well as non-violent direct action.

C. The unsuccessful use of anti-Trades Union legislation by Sheffield City Council between November 2016 and February 2017 in an attempt to suppress peaceful protest against contentious tree felling plans carried out under the Streets Ahead PFI programme.

D. That elected Councillors, who are themselves Trades Union members, have overseen the use of Trades Union legislation in an attempt to suppress this peaceful legitimate process.

E. That the significant removal of essential urban street tree canopy cover, exacerbated by local concentration of planned or implemented tree-fellings, has been widely condemned by national and international experts.

F. The known climate change mitigation, environmental, health and well-being benefits of street trees, as acknowledged in numerous published research findings.

G. The highly questionable threat of civil court action against legitimate peaceful protesters, which has directly affected at least one member of this UCU branch (with one choosing to remain anonymous as she fears it could affect her career).

H. The lack of a meaningful and well founded Tree Strategy for the City of Sheffield - the current one not being fit for purpose and failing to pay adequate attention to the value of existing urban canopy cover.

### **2. This Branch believes:**

A. That the City Council’s attack on the right to peaceful legitimate protest is an affront to civil liberty, democracy and an embarrassment to the reputation of the City of Sheffield.

B. That the right to peaceful protest should be defended by the Trades Union movement.

C. That a democracy is founded on meaningful dialogue and robust debate between parties that is informed by facts and verifiable evidence; factors that Sheffield City Council needs to demonstrate a

willingness to support and facilitate. That contracting out of services to PFIs results in the less accountable management of public services.

**3. This Branch resolves:**

A. To call upon Sheffield City Council to drop its misguided intention to implement civil court proceedings against lawful protestors.

B. To call upon Trades Unions to remind their members, particularly those who also hold elected public office, of their responsibility not to bring the Trades Union movement into disrepute through their actions, including the sanctioning of recourse to anti-Union legislation and the use of civil court action to make citizens fearful of the consequences of engaging in lawful protest.

C. To call upon Sheffield City Council to open a meaningful and sustained dialogue with citywide tree campaign groups, appropriate University of Sheffield experts and external experts in arboriculture and highways management, in order to establish a proper city-wide long term Tree Strategy.

D. To call for an immediate moratorium on street tree felling in Sheffield for all but dead, dying and diseased street trees.

E. To demand a proper asset valuation of the Sheffield street tree stock and a full cost-benefit analysis with regard to environmental and ecological services provided by healthy street trees, particularly large canopy trees.