

RECLAIMING THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY: WHAT ROLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS?

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Abstract: Industrial action in the UK higher education sector since 2018 has shone a light on the multiple crises that impact the system. Universities had already been badly affected by the imposition of a tuition fee funding model and aggressive marketisation, but increasingly find themselves at the centre of the new culture wars. There is growing state interest in the activities of academics and interventions into actions on university campuses. In an age of colliding crises, the traditional role of the public university is increasingly being questioned. In recent years these developments have been paralleled by industrial action by the University and College Union (UCU) whose members have been in disputes with university employers over pensions, pay and working conditions. In this article I argue that this industrial action represented an important struggle over the material conditions of university workers, but it also represented a more fundamental, if often implicit, challenge to academic capitalism and the neoliberal university. However, despite an important victory in relation to pensions for workers in some universities, the outcome of the sector-wide dispute on pay and working conditions must be considered as a defeat. In the article I offer an explanation for this setback, and assess whether, and in what ways, a trade union like UCU can contribute to a radical reclaiming, and reinvention, of the public university.

Keywords: higher education sector industrial relations, trade union renewal, union organising, UCU

INTRODUCTION

Education, in all its forms, is always a political act and therefore it is inevitable that public education systems will be sites of struggle and contestation over competing visions of what the future can look like. It is for this reason that public education in the United Kingdom has always been at the centre of the political right's efforts to push back against the advances of post-war welfarism and to use the education system to secure support for its complex project of neoliberal and neoconservative restructuring. In the current conjunctural moment, as a range of crises collide, and as whatever social cohesion may have existed continues to splinter, those who work in educational institutions

frequently find themselves on the frontline of what have become known as the culture wars.¹ There can be little doubt that such conflicts are intensifying as authoritarian populist forces mobilise, but at the same time there is nothing intrinsically new about these developments. Rather they have been an ever-present feature of the political right's long war of position that has sought to dismantle post-war social democracy and replace it with a society where inhabitants have internalised the notion that there is no such thing as society.

The struggles that I am describing have been evident in every area of education from the school sector through to further, adult and higher education, but the issues have been posed particularly starkly by the recent disputes in UK universities that extend back to the beginning of 2018, and continued on and off for more than five years. The ongoing disputes suggested a sector in crisis, and although this is being written at a time when that period of action has ended, it is far from clear that the wider issues will not continue to re-surface.

In this article I seek to understand the significance of the industrial unrest in UK higher education from 2018 to 2023 and to assess to what extent the action by the union was not only a reflection of crises in the university sector, but may have also represented a more fundamental challenge to academic capitalism itself. The article therefore specifically focuses on the experiences of the University and College Union (UCU). UCU is the largest union in the sector and represents academic staff, and more senior academic-related staff. Other unions recruit and organise in universities, but UCU's role in the industrial action between 2018 and 2023 make the union the focus of this article. My particular interest is in addressing three questions. Firstly, were the disputes involving UCU members traditional pay and conditions disputes alone, or did the union action pose wider questions about the nature and purpose of higher education? Secondly, what lessons might be drawn from the outcomes of the disputes, assessing both successes and setbacks? Finally, what wider conclusions might be drawn about the possibilities, and limitations, of trade unionism as a genuinely transformative force in higher education?

I have a long interest in researching industrial relations in education, both in schools and in post-compulsory education. However, my analysis of the events and developments covered in this article is much more personal and draws on my experience as an activist in the University of Nottingham UCU branch over an extended period of time, but in particular during the periods of industrial action that commenced in 2018.² In this article I seek to weave both national and local perspectives in an effort to integrate analysis and activism. I make no claim to present a systematic autoethnography, but in drawing on my personal accounts, records and journals I have endeavoured to be rigorous, systematic and reflexive in order to formulate an analysis grounded in evidence as well as experience. The analysis inevitably reflects my personal context – working as a senior academic, with a secure employment contract, in a pre-1992 university and being involved in a relatively large

1. Janet Newman and John Clarke, 'What's at Stake in the Culture Wars?' *Soundings*, 81, 2022, pp13-22.

2. The analysis presented here is my own and I make no claim to represent the collective view of the branch in any form.

and well organised UCU branch. That positioning almost certainly carries particular perspectives, and these reflections are presented with that caveat.

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A SITE OF STRUGGLE: 'TOO MANY UNIVERSITIES TEACHING TOO MUCH OF THE WRONG THINGS'

There is nothing that is original or novel about claiming that the education system is a key site of struggle in the contest for ideological dominance between social groups and movements.³ What is perhaps more controversial is to assert that the political right has typically understood the significance of this conflict much better than the left, and consequently it has been more strategic, better organised and more effective in the on-going struggles that take place over both the purposes and form of education.⁴ In the context of England this became obvious in the 1960s when the consequences, and possibilities, of welfare state expansion emerged more clearly.⁵ Any public provision of services poses an immediate threat to capitalist logic because the user's experience is not defined by an individualised market exchange, but rather it is based on a different set of values. The provision of services such as health care and education outside of the market has an obvious material benefit for those who otherwise could not afford to access these services, but public provision also works ideologically. The 'common sense' of private ownership, market allocation of resources and the essential function of profit is disrupted fundamentally. Not in an abstract form, but in a very real and practical sense. People learn through their own experience that resource distribution does not require market exchange. This is particularly the case in education where both the form (non-marketised public provision) and the content (the curriculum) have such obvious ideological consequences. What became increasingly apparent, especially in the 1960s, is that developments *within* the education system were opening up new progressive possibilities. Pedagogical practices in primary schools (associated with publication of the Plowden Report), the re-organisation of secondary schools along comprehensive lines and demands for the democratisation of the universities all demonstrated how collective provision provided a base to consider wider questions of equality and democracy.

As struggles over the direction of the welfare state developed, the political forces of the New Right began to mobilise and significant elements of this nascent intellectual movement began to coalesce around an alternative education prospectus. An early iteration of this development was the publication of a series of 'Black Papers' that railed against the new egalitarianism in public education, in both schools and higher education. Significantly, the first Black Paper was titled '*The Fight for Education*', highlighting the right's recognition that different perspectives on the purposes of public education reflected an ideological conflict between interests that offered competing visions of the future.⁶ Such an approach understood that system transformation

3. Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, third edition, Routledge, 2004.

4. Michael W. Apple, *Educating the 'Right' Way: Markets, Standards, God and Inequality*, second edition, Routledge, 2006.

5. Education is a devolved responsibility in the United Kingdom and therefore the responsibility of individual nations.

6. Brian Cox and Anthony Dyson (eds), *The Fight for Education: A Black Paper*, The Critical Quarterly Society, 1969.

must concentrate on both the content of education (the curriculum and the labour of those engaged as knowledge workers) and its organisational form (the ownership and governance of educational institutions). The inevitable outcome was a much sharper focus on the management and control of those engaged in knowledge work.

Much of the early focus of reform, and subsequent conflict, was on the years of statutory schooling. This was where the working class was educated, and so this was where questions about the purposes of education were posed most starkly. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this struggle for control of the school system emerged in the extended industrial dispute that lasted from 1984 to 1986. The teachers' action between their unions and the employers was ostensibly about pay, but at the time *The Times* newspaper perceptively commented the dispute was 'more about management than money'.⁷ In short, the dispute can be considered as much more than narrowly focused on pay and conditions (the basis on which it was conducted by the teachers' unions) and must be considered as a conflict over the control of teachers and their work (as the essential first steps in the state securing greater control of the curriculum, and hence greater influence over the purposes of education). It is a reminder that there is no tidy separation between an industrial dispute, and the wider context within which it is conducted. Conflicts over material conditions inevitably blur with wider struggles over purpose and values.

The broader problem that the dispute highlighted was that the progressive possibilities of post-war welfarism were generating aspirations that could not be met against the context of deindustrialising British capitalism, and so conflict became inevitable as the state sought to reassert control over schooling. The educational historian Brian Simon highlighted the issues when he quoted a senior official in the Department of Education at the time:

We are in a period of considerable social change. There may be social unrest, but we can cope with the Toxteths. But if we have a highly educated and idle population we may possibly anticipate more serious social conflict. *People must be educated once more to know their place.* [emphasis added]⁸

In this short but significant statement the perceived problem is clearly articulated: educational expansion, combined with economic stagnation, was creating a set of expectations that could not be realised (particularly among working class youth). The fear was that frustration was unpredictable and would lead to pressures for change that could not be contained. Hence, in the years following the teachers' action, the school sector has been the site of a permanent revolution in which discourses of 'standards', choice and school autonomy have been paralleled by relentless centralisation.⁹ While rhetorically claiming to decentralise, the state has assumed increasing control over almost every aspect of school education, from the training of teachers to unprecedented influence over the curriculum and teaching methods.¹⁰

7. Stephen J. Ball, 'Staff Relations During the Teachers' Industrial Action: Context, Conflict and Proletarianization', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31:5, 1988, pp289-306, p290.

8. Brian Simon, 'Breaking School Rules', *Marxism Today*, September 1984, pp19-25, p21.

9. Stephen J. Ball, *The Education Debate*, fourth edition, Bristol University Press, 2021.

10. Viv Ellis (ed.), *Teacher Education in Crisis: The State, the Market and the Universities in England*, Bloomsbury, 2023; Diane Reay, 'The Slide to Authoritarianism in English Schools', *Forum: for Promoting 3-19 Comprehensive Education*, 64:3, 2002, pp126-139.

11. The Robbins Report was published in 1963 and led to a significant expansion of higher education.

12. National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* [Dearing Report], HMSO, 1997.

13. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* [Browne Report], BIS, 2010.

14. Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University*, John Hopkins University Press, 1997.

15. Rosemary Deem, "New Managerialism" and Higher Education: The Management of Performances and Cultures in Universities in the United Kingdom', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 8:1, 1998, pp47-70.

Historically, efforts to assert increased control over the higher education sector were more muted than they were in schools. Despite the Robbins-driven expansion, higher education throughout the 1970s and 1980s remained the preserve of the middle class, and so did not attract the same interest from the state as schools.¹¹ Moreover, universities, with their emphasis on academic freedom, and governance arrangements intended to place institutions at arm's length from government, appeared insulated from the type of direct interventions that had been deployed in schools. However, this began to change in the late 1990s when the publication of the Dearing Report into the financing of higher education coincided with the election of a Labour government that saw education (and the expansion of higher education) as central to its drive to develop human capital.¹² Such an expansion inevitably required resourcing, and the Dearing Report opened the door to alternatives to the traditional system of funding tuition and providing means-tested maintenance grants from general taxation. Tuition fees for individual students, financed by a system of loans, were introduced in 1998 (at the level of £1,000 per year), but by 2010 fees had increased to £9,000.

At one level, the 2010 fee hike can be explained as the predictable response of a neoliberal government to economic crisis as it sought to shift the cost of public services to private individuals. However, the cultural shift in the sector that tuition fees presaged, as much as the economic imperative, has been at least as significant. The impetus arguably came from the Browne Review into higher education funding that explicitly stated that UK higher education was not sufficiently exposed to the discipline of market forces and that making the sector much more open to market pressures would drive both efficiency and quality.¹³ Inevitably, the impact of tuition fees on the sector has been much more far reaching. The pressures on universities to develop themselves as entrepreneurial institutions was already well established before tuition fees were introduced, and is by no means unique to the UK.¹⁴ Similarly, evidence of an emerging managerialism that challenged traditional forms of university governance was already visible in the system.¹⁵ However, tuition fees, combined with a range of linked funding reforms, have amplified and intensified the marketisation of higher education in the UK. Interactions with students have become transactionalised in a relationship that now involves the Office for Students and the Competition and Markets Authority, while a raft of devices such as the National Student Survey serve to recast the relationship between student and teacher. The student is a consumer who is exhorted to exercise choice in order to maximise value.

The consequences of this new relationship inevitably begins to reshape the behaviours of both providers and users, as higher education institutions seek to develop and expand courses with high market demand, while students are encouraged, or even compelled, to choose courses linked to employment opportunities that provide a realistic chance of repaying their student loan. As a consequence of the manipulation of this not so invisible hand, higher

education course provision becomes ever more closely aligned to the needs of capital. Where market exchange cannot be relied on to deliver the desired outcomes, then the state is prepared to intervene more directly (through the Office for Students) in order to, for example, ‘crackdown on rip-off university degrees’ (the title of the Department for Education’s own press release confirming the government will limit student numbers on particular degrees and will also reduce and hold down tuition fees for some specific courses).¹⁶

The intentions of these reforms appear clear. There is an obvious prioritising of university programmes that are perceived to align closely to the demands of the economy (STEM programmes, Business and Management degrees), and a corresponding de-prioritising of courses associated with the development of more critical orientations among students. Consistent with developments in the school sector, and in further education, there is a clear intention to align educational ‘output’ ever more closely to the labour market demands of the economy. Less obvious, but perhaps no less intentional, is a desire to reduce the overall numbers accessing university education, a proposal that has been actively promoted by a group of MPs aligned with the hard right *New Conservatives* group.¹⁷ This is what educating the working class ‘*once more to know their place*’ looks like forty years after the Thatcherite revolution in education began in the early 1980s. Much of it is now framed around a narrative of ‘too many graduates’.¹⁸ A version of this thinking was clearly articulated by William Atkinson, deputy editor of the influential *Conservative Home* blog site, in which he argued ‘we have too many universities teaching too much of the wrong things’.¹⁹ As Atkinson concludes his article, the real cause of his anxiety is identified as ‘the inability of nominally Conservative administrations to pay attention to the cultural warning lights that are dragging a generation of students to the left’. The battles over the opening up, or closing down, of educational opportunity are a struggle for hearts and minds and, therefore, ultimately a struggle over what the future looks like. The political right has always understood that this is not something that can be left to chance.

In this overview of educational restructuring, across both the school and higher education sectors, I have endeavoured to highlight the complex mix of educational purposes that play out in educational institutions, and the practices of those engaged in knowledge work. Education has always had a key role in preparing young people for work by equipping them with both the skills and dispositions that allocate them to assume their place in the capitalist labour market. However, education also shapes identities as well as developing human capital and it is these cultural and ideological elements of education that have assumed particular significance in an age of crises and social fragmentation.

My interest in this article is to explore the role and place of education trade unions in the struggles over the future of public education. I have already argued that the teachers’ industrial action in the mid-1980s cannot

16. Department for Education, ‘Crackdown on Rip-off University Degrees’, press release, 17 July 2023.

17. ‘Tory Faction Denies Push to Ban some Students from Going to University’, *Independent*, 11 September 2023.

18. See ‘Johnson: Too Many University Graduates End Up with Degrees that Don’t Get Them Jobs’, *Evening Standard*, 29 September 2020.

19. William Atkinson, ‘Universities. Both Truss and Sunak have Suggested Reforms. But Neither of the Candidate’s Proposals will Solve Higher Education’s Problems’, *Conservative Home*, 8 August 2022.

20. Nick Davies, 'Political Coup Bred Disaster', *The Guardian*, 16 September 1999.

be separated from the Thatcherite revolution in schools that immediately followed it. Each is inextricably linked to the other – a claim supported by statements from Kenneth Baker, the education minister responsible for the transformative 1988 Education Reform Act.²⁰ In the sections that follow I seek to extend this analysis to the higher education sector, and to analyse more recent developments in UK universities. In what ways can the recent industrial disputes in higher education be linked to a wider crisis in academic capitalism? To what extent are education trade unions able to transcend a traditional concern with pay and conditions issues to offer a more fundamental challenge to the neoliberal restructuring of the public university?

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND TRADE UNIONISM IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR: RESTRUCTURING, RESISTANCE AND RETREAT

In the higher education sector contemporary industrial relations have largely been defined by the coming together of two quite different systems when the university and polytechnic sectors were combined in 1992. Prior to 1992 polytechnics were located in the local authority system and consequently industrial relations structures shared many of the 'whitley-style' features of collective bargaining that were common in the public sector (formal and highly-structured negotiations focused around a clearly-defined national contract). In contrast, the older universities typically had much more diverse, and less formalised, collective bargaining arrangements and a tradition that eschewed tight contractual control of working hours (seen as incompatible with the idealised notions of research and scholarship). Trade union members in both these systems had been represented by their own unions (the Association of University Teachers (AUT) in pre-1992 universities and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) in post-1992 universities), but this division had little logic in the new unified system. Hence, in 2006 the UCU was formed as a merger of the AUT and NATFHE. System unification provided an obvious impetus for merger, although in many ways differences between the two unions reflected many of the systemic differences between pre- and post-1992 institutions that continue to exert a significant influence on today's HE sector. For example, not only did the two unions have quite different industrial relations traditions but they also had sharply contrasting political and organisational cultures, while NATFHE's identity as a union was also framed by its significant membership based in the non-university post-compulsory sector (hence bringing further, adult and prison education workers into the new union).²¹

One early response to sector fragmentation was the negotiation of a national Framework Agreement that introduced a single pay spine (for non-professorial appointments) and presaged a major job evaluation process within

21. Bob Carter, 'When Unions Merge: The Making of the UCU', *Capital and Class*, 32:3, 2008, pp87-112. (Hereafter *When Unions Merge*.)

institutions. A pay dispute in 2006 (including strike action and a marking boycott) also yielded some results.²² However, although merger created some additional industrial strength the new union suffered from relatively low density levels (for example, much lower than the school sector, a phenomenon that is replicated internationally).²³ It also faced an employer body (the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association) that appeared able to maintain high levels of unity and that resolutely refused to negotiate beyond the core issue of pay.²⁴ Negotiations took place through the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (re-formed as 'new JNCHEs' in 2006) involving UCU and other higher education sector unions.²⁵ However, at the level of individual institutions, negotiating arrangements could differ quite significantly between formal Joint Negotiating Committees through to what were described as informal 'tea and buns' meetings with the Vice Chancellor.²⁶ Union organisation was often assisted by individual branches being based on individual institutions, providing a focus for local organisation, but the downside of this could be a heavy dependency on a core group of activists involved in the branch committee, with union organisation at a more local level (in the schools and departments where members work) being much more limited. Stevenson and Mercer's study of sector industrial relations noted 'there was, in some cases, evidence of a network of "departmental contacts", but these tended to have a limited role, such as distributing union literature' (*Challenging Times*, p15).

The challenges facing UK higher education sharpened significantly following the global financial crisis in 2008/9. The response of the coalition government was to impose swingeing public expenditure cuts, but to also pursue policies of aggressive marketisation in public services. The stated intention was to expose public sector workers to the 'discipline and fear' of market forces.²⁷ The most visible response to the austerity measures imposed by the coalition government was substantial strikes across the public sector against pension cuts in 2011, with education unions, including UCU members in post-1992 universities playing a high profile role.²⁸ However, this cross-union movement quickly divided and subsequently dissipated having secured only modest concessions from government. This was also the time when pensions in the pre-1992 universities began to be attacked: firstly in 2010/11 (when new entrants lost access to the final salary scheme), and again in 2013/14 (when all members were transferred to a career average pension calculation). In 2013/14 and 2014/15 UCU took industrial action over pay and related issues across the higher education sector, although the volume of action was quite limited and support for action was patchy. One new tactic was the use of two hour strikes that were intended to have a short and sharp impact but at limited cost to those taking the action. The reality probably reflected a lack of confidence about members' support for more extensive action.

In summary and put starkly, as austerity and marketisation impacted the higher education system, UCU was struggling to mobilise its members in the

22. 'Lecturers Agree to End Strike', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2006.

23. Eurofound, *Representativeness of the European Social Partner Organisations: Education Sector*, 2020.

24. The national employers' organisation argues non-pay aspects of working conditions are matters for individual institutions.

25. UCEA, *Higher Education Pay Bargaining: A Brief History*, 2021.

26. Howard Stevenson and Justine Mercer, *Challenging Times: An Analysis of Current Developments and Future Prospects for Industrial Relations in the UK Higher Education Sector*, Society for Research into Higher Education, 2012. (Hereafter *Challenging Times*.)

27. D. Boffey, 'Public Sector Workers Need "Discipline and Fear", says Oliver Letwin', *The Guardian*, 30 July 2011.

28. Post-1992 universities have a classically public sector pension scheme. The USS scheme in pre-1992 universities is similar to private sector schemes.

much changed environment in which the union was trying to organise. Bob Carter had previously argued that the merger of NATFHE and AUT to form UCU had at least in part been driven by a conviction that divisions across the sector were preventing the separate unions from mobilising effective resistance to declining working conditions – ‘both unions were increasingly ineffective in addressing members’ workplace grievances’ (*When Unions Merge*, p90). However, in the years that followed it was not clear that the UCU merger had materially changed that context.

At a trade union level, it can be argued that responses remained rooted in a limited (and limiting) ‘resistance’ that sought to challenge attacks on working conditions, but did so without a simultaneous effort to build collective organisation. For Carter et al., ‘resistance’ was characterised by a dependency on traditional forms of industrial action (principally strike action), driven largely from within the union’s activist base.²⁹ In these contexts the union’s broader membership has a key role to play in delivering the action itself (and therefore ‘impact’), but is often treated as a resource to be turned on (or off) as determined by others. Such an approach may be effective when union density levels are high, and when member commitment ensures members can be relied on to follow union instructions, but if density levels are low and/or members have low levels of commitment to participation, then such ‘resistance’ is not sufficient. At this time UCU appeared locked in a debilitating cycle of limited resistance, defeat and retreat, with no obvious sign of a change in fortunes.

29. Bob Carter, Howard Stevenson and Rowena Passy, *Industrial Relations in Education: Transforming the School Workforce*, Routledge, 2010.

UCU AND UNION RENEWAL: A UNION TRANSFORMED?

In the higher education sector any discussion of UCU’s dramatic change of fortunes must start with the pensions dispute that broke out in early 2018, affecting members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) (and hence only the pre-1992 universities). The employers’ experience of successfully imposing pensions cuts in 2010/11 and 2013/14, combined with UCU’s limited ability to mobilise members over pay in 2013/14 and 2014/15, arguably contributed to the employers’ over-confidence when pre-1992 universities proposed swingeing cuts to the sector’s pension scheme in 2018. UCU’s response was to ballot members for industrial action. This was the first strike ballot in the sector under the 2016 Trade Union Act that required at least a 50 per cent turnout in a postal ballot. Consequently, and arguably reflecting a lack of confidence based on relatively recent past experience, the decision was taken to ‘disaggregate’ the ballot by institution, allowing the union to take action in individual branches where more than 50 per cent was achieved, but not jeopardising the dispute if 50 per cent was not secured across the sector taken as a whole. As it transpired, only a handful of individual branches failed to meet the 50 per cent threshold and the total turnout was 58 per cent.

Fourteen days of strike action were announced in sixty-five pre-1992 institutions (an unprecedented volume of action when compared to 2013/14 and 2014/15) and the union was able to mobilise a substantial presence on picket lines, often supported by large numbers of students. Social media quickly assumed a significant role in the dispute helping activists to project their action outwards, but also helping to connect activists across branches (encouraging new alliances beyond the union’s traditional factions). ‘Teach outs’ were another common feature of the strike days, emphasising an important educative dimension to the action and highlighting the opportunities to bring ideas and activism together in particular moments. In March 2018 an initial effort by the union’s leadership to broker a negotiated settlement was met with a grassroots challenge from branches and, significantly, the deal was rejected. Ultimately, however a deal was secured that retained USS as a defined benefits pension scheme and that established a Joint Expert Panel to review future financing models. This deal won majority support from members for acceptance.

Buoyed by the confidence of the 2018 result, UCU balloted members for industrial action again in autumn 2019. Ongoing problems with USS maintained a focus on pensions in pre-1992 institutions, but now a second, and sector-wide, front was opened up on pay, workload, precarious working and equalities issues. This dispute was framed as the ‘four fights’, and as per the previous ballot, both USS and ‘four fights’ ballots were disaggregated (for an overview of national ballot results see Table 1). Within the University of Nottingham branch there was some debate as to the efficacy of focusing only on USS (a clear objective and focused dispute) or on expanding the dispute to the ‘four fights’ which introduced a wider range of issues and had the potential to unify pre- and post-1992 sectors. My understanding is that these debates were replicated more widely in the union. The adoption of the ‘four fights’ campaign was undoubtedly bold and radical, with the potential to

Table 1: Ballot results for strike action 2018-2023 – National results and University of Nottingham branch.³⁰

	National				University of Nottingham			
	USS		‘Four Fights’		USS		‘Four Fights’	
	turnout (%)	‘yes’ vote (%)	turnout (%)	‘yes’ vote (%)	turnout (%)	‘yes’ vote (%)	turnout (%)	‘yes’ vote (%)
January 2018	58	88			58	88		
October 2019	53	79	49	74	53	80	53	75
November 2021	53	76	51	70	63	72	63	64
October 2022	60	85	58	81	66		66	
April 2023	58	89	56	86	73		73	
November 2023			43	68			62	

30. National figures exclude Northern Ireland where the legal requirements for industrial action ballots are different. These results are also the initial results published. In some cases individual branches were re-balloted and were able to cross the 50 per cent threshold on the rebalot. University of Nottingham branch results for October 2022, April 2023 and November 2023 are based on local records of members indicating to branch officers that they had voted in the national ballot. As national figures were aggregated it is not possible to provide actual voting figures. Nor is it possible to identify how members voted, or differences in participation rates between the USS and ‘four fights’ ballots.

overcome the sectionalism that a USS-only dispute entailed. However, some of the challenges of extending and expanding the dispute were highlighted in the ensuing ballot results with a reduced turnout in the USS ballot when comparing January 2018 (58 per cent) and November 2019 (53 per cent) and small but appreciable differences in turnouts between the USS dispute and 'four fights'. Voting patterns across institutions reveal complex trends, but suggest that post-1992 institutions had typically not experienced the radicalising 'bounce' that the 2018 pensions shock had on pre-1992 branches.

As industrial action came to an end in Spring 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic hit and in mid March universities announced a shift to remote working. Consequently, union activism was largely focused on managing the pandemic measures in individual institutions and the union's national disputes were effectively paused, at least until Autumn 2021 when a further round of balloting (on both USS and 'four fights') produced mandates for industrial action. By this time some of the structural divisions within the union were emerging more clearly. Once again, the USS ballot recorded a higher aggregate turnout (53 per cent) than the four fights ballot (50 per cent), but what was also significant was the substantial number of branches who failed to achieve 50 per cent (and therefore could not take any industrial action). When ballot results were initially announced only 54 of the 146 branches met the 50 per cent turnout threshold required. These were typically larger branches and therefore represented a disproportionately larger share of the membership, but the divisions were clear and the implications for effective action were equally apparent. Against this background industrial action was inevitably uneven, and my own notes recorded that strike action felt fractured and often patchy across the sector. These divisions were then made more visible when the industrial action mandate extended into the student assessment period and the union began a marking and assessment boycott (MAB) in Summer 2022. There is not the space to discuss these particular events in detail, but what was apparent was that only a small proportion of branches engaged in a MAB of any sort (UCU's website indicates the figure was twenty branches). Although, by this measure, the action may be considered extremely limited (involving 14 per cent of branches balloted), it was also novel and potentially highly disruptive in the relatively small number of institutions where it was threatened. As a consequence, a high proportion of institutions potentially impacted by a boycott preferred to broker a local deal with their UCU branch rather than face disruption to marking. This was the experience at the University of Nottingham where management moved quickly to make local concessions (within the national framework) to agree a deal that was then overwhelmingly accepted by members in a local ballot.

Arguably one of the key outcomes of the experience of fracturing industrial action in the first half of 2022 was to seek to unify the union by switching to aggregated ballots from autumn 2022 onwards. This was a bold move and clearly carried a risk if, in total, the union did not secure more than 50 per

cent. However, it also promised to overcome, in part at least, the problems caused by a significant number of institutions not participating in the action because they had not achieved the threshold (and thereby placing their employers under no pressure to reach a settlement). The first aggregated ballot results were published in October 2022 (for both USS and ‘four fights’) with subsequent ballots in April and November 2023 (with November covering ‘four fights’ only, as by this time the possibility of a settlement in relation to USS looked more promising and so USS action was suspended). In October 2022 the decision to aggregate the ballots had clearly paid off with both ballots securing the highest national turnouts since the start of both campaigns. There is no doubt some of this increase was the result of the developing cost-of-living crisis (and the increase in union members’ confidence that flowed from a surge in economy-wide trade union militancy), but it is not unreasonable to claim that the ability to deliver sector-wide action for the first time was also a galvaniser. This capacity to hold the union together across the sector was maintained in April 2023 when the six-month re-ballot required by law delivered another mandate across both disputes with turnout figures only marginally below the result of the previous ballot. At the University of Nottingham internal branch records indicated a 73 per cent return – easily the highest turnout the branch had achieved in any previous ballot. What was significant about this result was that the mandate clearly covered the summer assessment period and raised the prospect of a sector-wide national marking boycott of end of academic year assessments (in contrast to the limited and localised boycott of the previous year). In terms of internal momentum, this was probably the period when the union’s leverage was at its maximal point.

However, at this time divisions within the union about strategy and tactics sharpened further and considerable controversy surrounds the summer 2023 marking and assessment boycott. The union began the action, but not before efforts were made to try to settle the dispute. In April 2023 proposals from the employers on pay and conditions were rejected in an electronic consultation with members, despite elements of the union’s leadership initially signalling its preference to accept the deal.³¹ As a consequence, the prospect of a national boycott became much more likely although there were concerns raised about the national union’s commitment to a boycott, and consequently the level of preparedness for such complex and high stakes industrial action.

For anyone involved in the summer 2023 boycott this was likely the most challenging and difficult industrial action of the entire period since 2018. By definition not all members were involved (because not all members engage in marking and assessment), and refusing to mark students’ work is necessarily an emotionally difficult decision to take. The response from employers was to maintain unity and to make no concessions, while institutions went to extraordinary lengths to undermine the boycott (by invoking COVID-19-style ‘contingency regulations’ to ensure unmarked work did not prevent students graduating). Simultaneously, the vast majority of institutions imposed punitive

31. The employers’ proposals were rejected by 56 per cent of voting members.

32. Commonly 50 per cent (as at Nottingham), but in some cases 100 per cent of salary.

pay deductions for anyone participating in the MAB.³² For all these reasons the MAB was a difficult industrial action to prosecute. There can be no doubt that within some institutions, including at the University of Nottingham, the impact was substantial, but across the sector, and often within individual institutions, the boycott was very uneven. Against this background, in late August 2023 (and after the summer undergraduate graduation period) the national union balloted members on whether to continue or lift the MAB, despite making no progress with employers. A majority of members (60 per cent) voted to lift the boycott. The implications of this result were significant. Many members had experienced substantial pay deductions for participation in the MAB, but the action was lifted without securing any concessions from employers. It was therefore unsurprising when, in November 2023, the union's national industrial action ballot to continue the 'four fights' dispute fell well short of the legal threshold (the national turnout was 43 per cent). To all intents and purposes this marked the end of this extended phase of the action that was sparked in 2018, expanded in 2019, but which concluded in Autumn 2023.

After all the previous action there is no doubt that the ballot result in November 2023 was a setback for the union and must be considered as a defeat. It was the case that by this time the union was on the verge of securing a significant victory in relation to pensions (an outcome confirmed in December 2023) but this only impacted members in pre-1992 universities. In relation to the 'four fights' across the whole university sector progress was extremely limited. However, despite this setback, it is also important to acknowledge the transformative impact of the experience on the union, and the union's wider impact on the sector. I have stated previously:

This is not to argue that every UCU member on strike, or boycotting their marking, views their actions as an assault on the ideological basis of the neoliberal university; but it is to assert that such sustained industrial action, waged over such a long period of time, has developed into a serious challenge to the system, with implications far beyond those of a dispute about wages and working conditions. As the dispute intensified, it was the values, cultures and practices of the modern university, as much as the material conditions experienced by university workers, that were being confronted by the organised actions of UCU members.³³

33. Howard Stevenson, 'Higher Education Policy and a Future Labour Government: Distinguishing the Probable from the Possible', *Soundings*, 84-85, 2023, pp186-198, p192.

My words above were written from 'in the moment', specifically at the height of the marking and assessment boycott, which felt like the most intense period since the disputes started. What I want to do in the concluding section is to revisit my observations from that time and open them up to more critical scrutiny. Was I 'overclaiming' in the heat of the moment, when it appeared at the time that UCU members' action was causing unprecedented levels of disruption? As struggles over the nature and purposes of education intensify,

I want to assess what lessons can be learned from UCU's experiences in the recent past, and what conclusions might be drawn about future possibilities. In conclusion, I want to assess what role trade unions such as UCU can play in disrupting the wider neoliberal and neoconservative project in educational institutions.

REFLECTIONS ON THE UCU DISPUTES: RENEWAL ... WITH RESERVATIONS

When UCU was formed in 2006 by amalgamating NATFHE and AUT Bob Carter's analysis of the merger argued that both the predecessor unions had been struggling to make progress in relation to protecting members' working conditions, and although the early days of the coalition government generated some response (most notably the public sector pensions strikes in 2011, and some activity with students to oppose tuition fee increases) it was clear that union amalgamation of itself had not transformed the fortunes of members of the new union (*When Unions Merge*). Certainly, industrial action in 2013/14 and 2014/15 was sporadic and its impact was limited. However, by the end of the decade that situation had been transformed. The union was engaged in industrial action on an unprecedented scale with the education sector accounting for 66 per cent of all strike days across the whole economy in 2018, of which a large majority was the UCU pensions dispute.³⁴ This action involved many more members than had previously been the case. The level of activity also brought with it a new wave of activists, typically more representative of the profile of the union's membership, with campaigns around precarious working and equalities issues drawing a more diverse range of members into union activity. At its best this new activism contributed to a vibrant workplace democracy in which union members met to debate issues and make democratic decisions about local and national union issues and strategy. I can still readily recall a mass meeting of striking branch members at Nottingham, convened in a public park, to discuss (and subsequently reject), the initial deal on the pensions dispute in March 2018. It was a moment made more powerful knowing that there were multiple other meetings taking place at exactly the same time in union branches all over the country. Similarly, I will always remember the period through July and August 2023 when the University of Nottingham UCU branch held seven branch meetings in eight weeks at the height of the marking boycott. Every meeting was well attended as members wrestled with debating complex issues and making collective decisions. In the Nottingham branch this local democracy had been deepened by a decision in 2019 to strategically develop a network of workplace representatives based in schools and departments who met online every week when the branch was either in a ballot campaign or had an industrial action mandate. This network of reps was key to the branch's success in delivering large ballot turnouts (see Table 1 for local branch

34. Office for National Statistics, *Labour Disputes in the UK, 2018, 2019*.

results alongside the national figures), but perhaps more importantly these were the union activists who provided the organic link between members in their immediate workplaces (in individual schools and departments), and the branch's leadership in the form of the branch committee. In many ways, this may be considered consummate union renewal of the type suggested by Peter Fairbrother and others.³⁵ Fairbrother had outlined the possibilities of a reinvigorated workplace-based unionism, in which decentralised structures created spaces for a more participative, grassroots workplace democracy, and there can be no doubt that the experience of UCU in the period after 2018 provided many examples of precisely this type of union renewal. Certainly, this was the experience of the branch at Nottingham.

How then, given the above, can we make sense of the outcome of the disputes, and in particular the failure of the union to achieve a significant breakthrough in the sector-wide 'four fights' dispute? Much of the analysis understandably focuses on the efficacy of particular decisions that were taken by the union's elected leadership at critical points of the dispute. Some of these decisions have been highlighted by one of my colleagues at Nottingham who identified 'key mistakes' that were made at different, often critical, points.³⁶ This type of analysis is very valuable, and must inform any post-dispute assessment, but there must also be an analysis that goes beyond blaming 'the leadership'. As Bieler argues 'it would be too easy simply to blame the national leadership. We as staff at universities also have to look at ourselves.'

My approach begins by revisiting Eric Hobsbawm's 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture in which he argued that working class progress had been stymied by forms of class struggle that had not only failed to adapt to changes in the economy and the composition of the working class, but which were culturally rooted in an economistic sectionalism that focused narrowly on wage militancy, often pitting better organised workers against the unorganised – arguing that an economistic trade union consciousness may at times 'set workers against each other rather than establish wider patterns of solidarity'.³⁷ At the core of Hobsbawm's concerns was the belief that an economistic sectionalism was contributing to division, isolation and weakness. For Hobsbawm, building 'wider patterns of solidarity' within, and crucially beyond, the trade union movement was the central challenge in a context where capitalist development was becoming increasingly complex and the labour market more fractured. Thinking in these terms helps to draw attention to some of the key challenges in the UCU campaigns that were evident from the outset, but which became amplified over time. They provide a sharp focus on divisions within the workforce and in the wider sector, that proved to be insurmountable obstacles to securing significant progress in the disputes.

Within the higher education workforce the obvious division was between union members and non-union members (according to Hobsbawm the 'most elementary index' of class consciousness) (*The Forward March*, p19). The reality is that union density levels in higher education are low by general public sector

35. Peter Fairbrother, 'Workplace Trade Unionism in the State Sector', in P. Ackers, C. Smith and P. Smith (eds), *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism: Critical Perspectives on Work and Organisation*, Routledge, 1996, pp110-148.

36. Andreas Bieler, 'Waging War on Staff: The Narrative of a Defeat', (blog), *Trade Unions and Global Restructuring*, 2023.

37. Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', 1978, in *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writing 1977-1988*, Verso, 1989, pp9-22, p21. (Hereafter *The Forward March*.)

standards, and certainly when compared to elsewhere in the education sector. This inevitably had an effect on the impact of any industrial action. These issues were often compounded by the significant variations in density levels between branches, or even between different sections of a branch within the same university. In practical terms this could mean significant parts of an institution were largely unaffected by strike action, even in universities where public signs of strike activity, such as picket lines, were conspicuous. However, these problems were then in turn exacerbated by divisions *within* the union between those who engaged in industrial action, and those who did not. The latter group were always significant, but also increased in number over time. This blunted the impact of strike action beyond the problem of low density and, in time, had the same effect on the marking and assessment boycott. What did become clear in the summer of 2023 was that a marking boycott had the potential to deliver a substantial disruptive impact in universities, but ultimately it was a strategy borne out of weakness, not strength, and so remained limited. It was precisely the *failure* to deliver effective strike action that led to the need for a boycott, and although the boycott was high-impact action its contentious nature among members, combined with aggressive actions by employers, meant it was supported by too few members and across too few branches.

A further practical consequence of the divisions within the union between those who were active and engaged in the dispute, and those who were not, was a not so visible, but still palpable, division into two parallel organisations. One version of UCU was a model example of the active, vibrant democratic union envisaged by Fairbrother, formed of committed activists fully engaged in union action and collective decision-making. The other version was a shadow organisation of card-carrying members who were disengaged from the action and often behaved as though the dispute was not happening. One paradox that flowed from this situation was that activist democracy could be exciting and exhilarating for those immersed in the action, but that this level of deep democratic engagement took place alongside a simultaneous increase in members disengaging from the action and the union's democratic structures. Member activism and member passivity were not only able to co-exist, but in some contexts both could increase simultaneously. Perhaps inevitably tensions developed within the union between those who wanted to use ballots and e-consultations to gauge individual members' opinions, and those who believed that decisions should be made through established collective democratic structures such as branch meetings and delegate conferences. The issues raise vexing questions about the nature of union democracy and the spaces within which union issues are debated, and decisions are made.

Perhaps most controversially I want to argue that a key division during the dispute was between union members and students. In the 2018 pension strikes, picket line activity was substantial and this often involved a significant student presence. However, in the action that followed, student support

became less visible, and over time much of it was reduced to a residual core of sympathetic student activists, mostly postgraduate research students who were the ones who could identify most readily with the wider questions raised by the strikes (especially the exploitation of precarious contracts and unsustainable workloads). It was the case that UCU worked effectively with the National Union of Students at a national level, and at individual institutions many branches enjoyed good relations with their students' unions. At the University of Nottingham there were several actions organised with the local students' union, but over time these were uneven and proved difficult to sustain. Across the country these alliances were often quite limited and relied on the commitment and support of those already sympathetic. Beneath the high-visibility solidarity actions at graduation ceremonies and occasional student occupations, amplified by social media, was a wider and deeper layer of students who had become progressively immune, often indifferent and sometimes antagonistic to the disruption to which their studies were subjected. The union's strap line that 'learning conditions are working conditions' may have resonated at a discursive level, but it largely failed to address students' wider concerns about their own levels of debt, unaffordable housing and the need to juggle study with zero hours and minimum wage work simply to be able to survive.³⁸ Arguably it was an example of what Jane McAlevey has called 'slick (but shallow) community-labor alliances' in which trade unions seek to construct coalitions with others, but based very largely on the demands of the union, which are then assumed to be equally relevant to others in the coalition.³⁹ In such cases there is little effort to construct a genuine alliance that has been formulated around an agreed agenda of overlapping, but by no means consonant, interests.

38. 'Up for a 4am Supermarket Shift, then Lectures: The Life of a UK Student Amid the Cost of Living Crisis', *The Guardian*, 5 December 2023.

39. Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organising for Power in the New Gilded Age*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p207.

The divisions outlined above were serious fault lines that ran throughout the period of UCU action between 2018 and 2023, and which are key factors when explaining the failure to make a breakthrough in the sector-wide pay and conditions dispute (USS specific contextual issues help to explain the different outcome in that dispute). This analysis does not deny the importance of other issues, and it certainly does not seek to diminish the extraordinary transformation of the union during this time, and the enormous contribution of all those engaged in the struggle. However, it does recognise that the outcome must be considered a defeat and therefore any claim to union renewal can only be offered alongside some serious reservations. Put simply, renewal did not extend wide enough, or go deep enough, to secure the levels of support within and beyond the union that were required to achieve success.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROGRESSIVE POSSIBILITIES FOR TRADE UNIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The industrial disputes involving UCU between 2018 and 2023 can be considered a direct manifestation of a university system in crisis. Industrial

action by trade union members typically reflects a wider set of grievances than those that are nominally the focus of the dispute, and the recent action in UK higher education was no exception. The highly-marketised and individualised university system is manifestly unsustainable, and it currently trades on the exploitation of the labour of those that it employs. Those who experience discrimination most acutely in the labour market are at the sharp end of this exploitation of university workers with systemic and structural inequalities embedded deep within the system. However, the crisis of academic capitalism is intensifying as higher education becomes the terrain on which the political right's fight for control of education is increasingly being played out. This is about much more than manufactured and manipulated culture wars, but is about working class access to higher education and the wider political implications of that. In essence, an education that offers the possibility of emancipation in some form or forms – or one that is only ever intended to reproduce the structural inequalities of the social system, leaving wider social relations unchallenged.

The UCU disputes offered some opposition to dominant views of higher education, largely because the scale of the action over time, and the range of issues contained within the 'four fights' dispute in particular, opened up a more fundamental challenge to the model of academic capitalism that now characterises the UK university system. Foregrounding precarity and pay gaps based on gender, ethnicity and disability were radical steps that confronted very specific ways in which the neoliberal university exploits its workforce. However, despite this, the challenge was limited because the disputes remained fundamentally economic struggles over pay and conditions issues, while at the same time, and closely connected, the disputes did not build and secure sufficient support from union members, the sector workforce beyond the union, students and the wider community to overcome the union's isolation. In these concluding remarks I want to suggest three steps that are necessary to address these issues, with each issue linked to the others.

First, is the need to acknowledge the complex, contradictory and downright messy nature of industrial disputes. Such conflicts are, characteristically, difficult to prosecute with divisions and the expectations of competing interests proving difficult to reconcile. This statement may not appear controversial, but I would argue it stands at odds with much of the analysis that is typically presented during strikes. For obvious and understandable reasons industrial disputes are organised around common interests. 'Unity' is both a principle and an objective. I believe it is also a chimera, certainly in the rather simplified form in which it is traditionally conceptualised. If it ever existed in some golden age of masculine, industrial trade unionism when organised labour apparently moved as one, then it does not exist in that form today, and nor is it realistic to assume that at some indeterminate point in the future the context will change and such unity will re-form. This is the worst type of determinism. The unity of organised labour is not the default setting it

is assumed to be and cannot somehow be secured by 'correct leadership' and the passing of an appropriate resolution. Rather division must be considered the default, and the challenge of 'leadership' (defined as all those who exercise leadership, not as 'the leadership') is to forge some common understanding and coherence when differences, and even divergent interests, are ever present. Imposing some idealised homogeneity when analysing situations that are anything but, is not helpful. Rather analysing the realities, seeking to understand differences and facing up to the problems posed by them, is an essential element of developing effective strategy. Anticipating my next point, it requires decision-making processes that recognise complexity and are comfortable with uncertainty.

Second, is the need to simultaneously strengthen union organisation and democracy by building union leadership at the level of the workplace and constructing the organic links between individual members in their workplaces, and wider democratic decision-making in the union. The UCU disputes have undoubtedly raised the visibility of the union and have made union membership a more significant aspect of many members' collective identity. However, the reality remains that for many members, in their immediate workplace, the union is not obviously present, and the sense of collective consciousness is weaker as a consequence. This type of workplace organisation, at a level beneath the institution-wide branch committee, is the great untapped resource within the union, and it provides the key to connecting the union with the grievances and concerns members experience every day at work. Union representatives working at this level are able to challenge the encroaching managerialism that university workers experience as suffocating, and it is this resistance, constantly contesting what Goodrich called the 'frontier of control', that helps transform collective consciousness and build union power.⁴⁰ This is what binds members to the union when the big set-piece national disputes are over and the mundane realities of grinding out a living in the neoliberal university are the daily diet of employees. Furthermore, as this role is developed, the workplace representative has the potential to connect the informal democracy of the workplace (members in *ad hoc* everyday discussions about the issues that concern them) with the more formal democracy of the union branch (the branch meeting with its resolutions and votes). Too often these informal and formal democratic spaces are disconnected. Integrating them through the activities of networked workplace representatives begins to build union power by developing collective identity through democratic engagement. It points to a richer and deeper democracy than the false binary of depending on membership surveys to address complex strategy questions versus the fetishisation of the union rulebook by claiming the sovereignty of barely quorate branch meetings. In the UCU disputes, the limitations of both were clearly visible. As Kirsten Forkert asks 'could we imagine union democracy in another way?', going on to further question 'should we find some other kinds of structure to

40. Carter L. Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workshop Politics*, Pluto Press, 1975 [1920].

facilitate the greatest possible engagement and participation, particularly for those who aren't necessarily familiar with union practices?'.⁴¹ Longer term, the use of more radical democratic models need to be developed.⁴² In this regard innovative practice is often to be found in social movements outside organised trade unionism, including for example in citizens' assemblies, ecological campaigns and feminist movements.

Thirdly, the UCU disputes between 2018 and 2023 highlighted the limitations of an industrial struggle that failed to connect to a wider set of issues in the sector, and so failed to construct the alliances with other university workers, with students and with the wider community who have an interest in a thriving, genuinely public university system. Although it is possible to highlight several interesting examples of this type of activity at a local level (such as the campaigns with cleaning workers at the University of London and joint campaigns with students at several universities) these instances are typically the exception rather than the rule. As Dave Featherstone has argued:

... while there have been some attempts to link the disputes to broader critiques of marketisation, and to construct broader alliances with students, university workers represented by other unions such as Unite, Unison and IWGB, and with workers beyond universities, these have tended to be underdeveloped and have often happened on an *ad hoc* basis, rather than resulting from a more consistent attempt to develop solidarities with common struggles.⁴³

In making this case I am keen to avoid posing some sort of idealised 'political unionism' against a simplified economism, because such analyses often fail to recognise the central importance of material realities in creating the conditions in which workers mobilise.⁴⁴ As Nancy Fraser has warned, there is a need to avoid replacing a 'vulgar economism' with a 'vulgar culturalism'.⁴⁵ Indeed, the evidence from UCU's experience of renewal confirms very clearly the need to understand, and take account of, critical developments such as the pensions cut in 2018, or the cost of living crisis in 2022. These are moments when material contexts matter and collective thinking can shift significantly. Trade union action is grounded in a struggle over control of the labour process, and no argument in favour of an expanded cultural politics in the trade union movement diminishes that. Rather it points to the need to connect immediate struggles over material conditions with a wider set of demands that raise questions about the system that is ultimately the cause of the problem. It may be argued that such political campaigning exposes the union to UK labour laws that are intended to shut down precisely this type of activity. However, the experience of the National Education Union (and the National Union of Teachers before it) has demonstrated that combining industrial militancy with outward facing political campaigning is not only

41. See 'Solidarity Against the Odds: Trade Union Activism in a Hostile Environment: Farheen Ahmed in conversation with Kirsten Forkert and David Featherstone', *Soundings*, 82, 2023, pp27-46, p33.

42. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, 1985.

43. Dave Featherstone, 'Editorial: The Crisis in Higher Education', *Soundings*, 84-85, 2023, pp5-16, p13-14.

44. See *The Forward March*, but see also Pete Ackers, 'Gramsci at the Miners' Strike: Remembering the 1984-1985 Eurocommunist Alternative Industrial Relations Strategy', *Labor History*, 55:2, 2014, pp151-172.

45. Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care and the Planet – and What We Can Do about It*, Verso, 2022, p28.

46. Chris Cooke, 'Is This the Start of a Return for the Teaching Unions?', *BBC Online*, 26 May 2017.

47. Gawain Little, Ellie Sharp, Howard Stevenson and David Wilson, *Lessons in Organising: What Trade Unionist Can Learn from the War on Teachers*, Pluto Press, 2023.

48. See Jonathan Gullis MP, 'Trotskyites Have Infiltrated the Teachers' Union', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 April 2023.

49. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith (eds), Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

50. John Kelly *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves*, Routledge, 1998.

possible (and legal), but also effective.⁴⁶ The union's approach is outlined in detail in *Lessons in Organising: What Trade Unionists can Learn from the War on Teachers*, and although the contexts are clearly very different, the merits of a trade unionism that integrates industrial and ideological struggles has an obvious applicability across the whole of the education sector.⁴⁷ At the centre of the strategy is the conviction that it is not possible to address concerns about working conditions without simultaneously challenging the systemic cause of the problems, namely the neoliberal restructuring of educational institutions. That such an approach represents a more fundamental challenge to employers and the state was revealed in the co-ordinated media response of Conservative politicians and commentators to publication of the book.⁴⁸ Responses clearly illustrated that what the political right fears most is any threat to their long revolution in education. As long as trade union action is restricted to the legal definition of a trade dispute and organised around a narrow range of industrial issues, then conflict is always, ultimately, manageable. However, what the experience of the NEU demonstrates is that it is possible to work within current legal parameters but still push the boundaries of what can constitute effective trade unionism, drawing on a wider repertoire of actions and engaging with a more diverse range of actors. As indicated, the contexts are different, and they are by no means equivalent, but there are also parallels that can offer useful pointers to future action across the education sector.

In presenting this analysis I am careful to avoid an unhelpful binary between, in Gramscian terms, a strike-based war of manoeuvre and an ideologically-driven war of position.⁴⁹ Each on their own are insufficient. There is a need to acknowledge the centrality of 'interests', and the mobilising impact of a sense of injustice when individual and collective interests are threatened.⁵⁰ However, to continue to work with Gramsci's metaphors of war of manoeuvre and position, the imperative is not to argue either/or, but to better understand how each is linked to the other in a genuinely dialectical relationship. Gramsci's own work made a powerful case for engaging in ideological struggle, as part of a long term war of position, but this strategy was not posed as an alternative to a more abrupt war of manoeuvre. When material contexts change, often in unanticipated and unpredictable ways, then direct confrontations between workers and their employers are more likely, and typically new possibilities open up. What I want to argue is decisive is the way such developments play out within a longer-term war of position that must both *precede* and *post-date* any momentary disruption to material conditions. This is the long-term ideological struggle that union activists in universities can no longer avoid. It is also a struggle that cannot be undertaken only in, and by, the union, but must also involve work with a wide range of progressive forces to form an alliance capable of seriously transforming not only higher education, but the wider education system, and public services more generally.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A NEW COLLECTIVE WILL

The UCU disputes highlight both the possibilities, and limitations, of a progressive trade unionism. The disputes were a significant challenge to the sector and arguably the most significant disruption in UK universities since 1968. On the other hand, the union was never able to fully break out of its relative isolation, and any challenge to the wider system was always more implicit than explicit. Ultimately, writing as 2023 turns into 2024, the sector-wide dispute is ended and the outcome of the ‘four fights’ dispute must be considered as a defeat, with potentially significant long-term consequences.

In many ways the experience has reasserted the central importance of organised labour as a focus for resistance, and indeed the inescapable significance of trade union struggles that contest labour exploitation and managerial control of the labour process. This may be apparent and accepted now, but it is not so long ago that such a view was deeply unfashionable, including among many describing themselves as ‘critical scholars’. However, the experience also highlights the need to locate organised labour within a much wider alliance that is built around a broader range of issues. The frontline in the struggle for the future of higher education is increasingly being played out around the political right’s drive to limit access to higher education and reconfigure university education for the working class as education that is utilitarian and transactional. The wider threat is the rise of an authoritarian populism in which academic freedom is increasingly attacked, and the limited traditions of democratic governance in public universities are progressively eroded. The spectre that haunts much more than Europe is a reinvented fascism, with all that entails for educational institutions as public and democratic spaces.

The immediate challenge in higher education at the current juncture is to resist those who assert that there are ‘too many universities teaching too much of the wrong things’, and to make the case for an expanded, more inclusive and more democratic vision of the public university that is at the heart of a reimagined role for public services and public spaces in a democracy. A very different vision of education must be central to a more optimistic and socially just vision of the future. The imperative is to move from critique to reconstruction, and to be able to draw together a diverse range of actors and movements to forge a new collective will around an alternative vision of the public university. Trade unions have a key role in any such collective formation, but this is not the same as occupying the ‘leading role’ and it is likely that new alliances will require new formations. An obvious first step is for the trade unions in the education sector to work much more closely together, recognising the key role of education in current struggles and that the issues their members face share many common features. However, such an alliance needs to extend much beyond sector trade unions and reflect the diverse demands and priorities of all those who believe another university is not only possible, but essential. This type of coalition-building is necessarily

messy and complicated. Immediate exhortations to show solidarity can be important, but they cannot substitute for the long-term relationship building that is the basis of robust and genuine alliances.

Above all the approach I am suggesting requires leadership, but it is a leadership quite different to the hierarchical and bureaucratised conceptions of leadership common in the trade union movement. Elsewhere I have described it as ‘educative leadership’, as an expression of leadership that is concerned with intentionally seeking to shift the thinking of others (or, drawing on a more traditional lexicon of the left, actively seeking to transform consciousness).⁵¹ It is not enough to ‘hate the indifferent’ (as Gramsci famously stated he had done in an early example of his political journalism), but rather the challenge is to shift the thinking of the passive majority through an ongoing process of critiquing the *status quo*, helping to imagine alternatives and connecting immediate struggles with longer term transformations.⁵² In this sense it is a leadership that is always, in essence, pedagogic, although never disconnected from immediate and practical realities. Rather, both the intellectual and the material are combined in a dialectical relationship. It is necessarily an approach to leadership that is dispersed, diverse and collective. In particular moments, when material circumstances change, it is possible that collective thinking can shift quickly, but by definition, this is an approach to leadership that is long term. It recognises the importance of patient and persistent work that maintains progress when conditions are not favourable and when the opportunities to mobilise others are not clear cut. It takes place in the interstices of the everyday as much as it is exercised on the picket line. It is a leadership that exists at every level of an organisation and works actively to make connections across movements, recognising that alliances are only strong when they are constructed from the base up.

The UCU disputes between 2018 and 2023 showed glimpses of this type of leadership. There was no doubt that the disputes had a radicalising impact on many university workers, and this opened up new possibilities to draw union members into activism. However, the strikes also highlighted the limitations of attritional industrial struggle in a context where the union had only a limited organisational base and employers remained united and confident. The challenge now is to find ways to capitalise on the extraordinary transformative experience of the period 2018-2023, while recognising that the union must rebuild following what must be acknowledged as a serious setback. This will require radical thinking and new ways of working. It will also require a cultural shift in the organisation and a re-imagining of what leadership can look like in a democratic movement.

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51. Howard Stevenson, *Educational Leadership and Antonio Gramsci: The Organising of Ideas*, Routledge, 2024.

52. Antonio Gramsci, *Odio Gli Indifferenti*, Chiarelettere Editore, SRL, 2011 [1917].