

Report for UCU University of Portsmouth on  
UCU Annual Equality Conference 2016

The conference was held at Aston University Birmingham from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 2016. The university has very good conference facilities at this modern city-centre campus and delegates who needed accommodation were conveniently located on the same campus.

There were separate conferences for each of the four equality strands <sup>1</sup> and a session for all delegates on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> December. This delegate (MG) attended the disabled members' conference, which came first on the agenda.

Delegates were welcomed to the disabled members conference by the Disabled Members' Standing Committee (DMSC) Chair, Emma-Jane Phillips who also gave a report. Minutes of the 2015 conference were confirmed. There was a discussion from the floor on the intersection of disability and race and questions were raised as to the commitment of the DMSC on opposing the oppression of black workers.

Two motions had been received for debate but these had both been ruled out of order on the grounds of lack of relevance by the DMSC. These decisions were challenged from the floor and after some lively debate both motions were ordered back on to the agenda. The first motion criticised the decision taken by the NEC to exclude members not currently in employment (including retired members) from membership of UCU standing committees. The second motion promoted the free movement of labour and opposed a points-based immigration system, subsequent to the EU referendum result. Both motions were passed.

One delegate, attending this conference for the first time, expressed her strong concerns about the tone of the debates. She said that voices had been raised, the atmosphere had been confrontational

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<sup>1</sup> Women members; Black & minority ethnic members; LGBT members; Disabled members.

at times and members had addressed each other with a lack of respect.

A presentation by Richard Rieser concerning disability and language had been planned but Richard was unable to get to the conference because of transport problems. Instead a film on the same topic, which had been made for Disability History Month was shown. This was then discussed by delegates with a remote contribution from Coventry University via video link. Unfortunately the video link was rather unreliable.

Malcolm Day from the University of Nottingham presented a most interesting paper entitled 'The role of peer to peer support in facilitating a positive culture for the disclosure of workers' disabilities'. This delegate (MG) has a copy of the paper which is available for loan to UCU members at the University of Portsmouth, if required. In the subsequent discussion there was a strong consensus about the importance of centralised funding within institutions for the support of disabled staff, and the pressing need for the post of staff disability officer at colleges and universities. Only two institutions have such a post currently.

Delegates were welcomed to the combined session for all groups by Dave Maritu, chair of the UCU Equality Committee and Vicky Knight, UCU vice-president gave a brief talk. Vicky emphasised the unprecedented challenge to the promotion of equality at work arising from the cuts to UK public services, plans for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US president.

Kirsten Forkert from Birmingham University gave a talk in which she examined the need to support members during and after Brexit. The tone of political debate during the referendum campaign had been toxic and had been accompanied by an increase in attacks on ethnic minority, disabled and LGBT people. We were witnessing a worrying rise in authoritarian populism at a global level, as exemplified by the election of Donald Trump.

Sally Brett from the TUC emphasised that the vote to leave the EU was not a vote for bigotry. EU law underpins much of UK equality legislation, including the entitlement to maternity and paternity rights at work. TUPE<sup>2</sup> derives from the EU. All these rights are now at risk but, rather than suddenly withdrawing them all, government will steadily ‘chip away’ at them. The European Court of Justice has been vital in developing and defending workers’ rights but the prime minister has said that the UK will not use this court.

Dawn Livingston, an organiser with Hope Not Hate, gave an overview of the work of this campaigning group focusing on their work with a wide variety of community groups. Post 16 education had a major role in helping to promote community cohesion, particularly colleges and universities in deprived post-industrial communities. She paid tribute to the work of the late Jo Cox MP who was murdered earlier in 2016 by a neo-nazi.

Finally there were workshops for FE and HE on the equality challenges facing members in each sector. The conference was then concluded.

Overall the conference provided a stimulating programme in a generally supportive and comradely atmosphere. It was very well organised and UCU staff worked tirelessly and efficiently to ensure a successful conference.

Martin Giddey

Southern Retired Members’ Branch.

18<sup>th</sup> January 2016

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<sup>2</sup> The right of workers to retain their wage levels and terms and conditions of employment when their employer changes.