

Build the rank-and-file revolt!

By Dan Davison, National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts Postgrad & Education Workers Co-Rep and Cambridge UCU activist. (Adapted from an article first published on anticuts.com)

The contrast between the ballot result and the wave of demonstrations, open letters, and branch resolutions for #NoCapitulation, is instructive for the problems with an atomised approach to democracy in a national organisation.

When in a room with others who have shared your struggle, the fostered feeling of solidarity boosts confidence, and one can actively participate in a structured discussion and debate the available positions. When voting alone, as individuals, that atmosphere of solidarity and accompanying confidence are lost. Moreover, in the context of the present dispute, those members who were not active during (and, presumably, less supportive of) the strike ended up receiving disproportionate guidance from leadership communications.

Though our current position is intensely dissatisfying, we have made genuine gains. UCU membership has increased by thousands and seen unprecedented energisation at the grassroots level. Now we must ask how we rank-and-file activists can prepare for the (almost inevitable) next round in the dispute should the talks with UUK fail and, more pointedly, how we can transform the union itself.

As it stands, UCU has all the trappings of a bureaucratised union disconnected from its more militant base, The UCU Left, dominat-



ed by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), serves as little more than an electoral machine. For these reasons, the proposals from some to “dual card” in smaller, more dynamic unions, such as the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) seem attractive.

While all available options should be considered carefully, there are significant advantages to a large, national union, not least in respect of collective bargaining. Since university employers in the sector have to deal with industry-wide unions such as UCU, it is harder to drive down wages on individual campuses and make the sector even more closely resemble a market than it does already. Dual-carding in the IWGB would not increase our industrial power, or give us an organisational capacity to take on the bureaucracy within UCU that we couldn't build by establishing a rank-and-file network within our own union.

The character of unions can change dramatically. Many of the large national

unions now infamous for bureaucracy, such as the GMB, grew out of the “New Unionism” of the 1880s, which replaced the older “craft union” models. This shift from craft unionism to new, industrial unionism meant an upsurge in militancy and the bringing together of different workers in the same industry to fight for collective gains rather than to defend the special interests of a privileged layer of skilled workers.

Conversely and more recently, rank-and-file activists transformed the traditionally conservative and bureaucratic Chicago Teachers Union into an energised, combative body (see back page).

We should be optimistic and ambitious about what we could achieve within UCU, building upon the kind of grassroots revolt we saw with the #NoCapitulation surge. With new rank-and-file networks emerging in the wake of the ballot result, a glimmer of hope appears in the darkness. It is a hope that springs from a single, potent realisation: we are the union.

Organise on campus!

By a Workers' Liberty UCU member

Democratising the union starts with the grass-roots. Given the problems with the existing leadership, certainly at national but sometimes also at branch level, it can be tempting to think alternative unions are the answer. But it's better to take over the union's structures where we can than to operate in parallel, leaving official branch committees disengaged, ineffectual or right wing.

The strike has been an opportunity to engage new activists: with AGMs coming up we should encourage strikers to stand for branch committee posts. Alongside that we should work to revive Joint Campus Committees. These should bring together

representatives of the different campus unions and the students union, but in many universities they've fallen into disuse. We should make sure they're as open as they can be, not just a caucus for union negotiators but a campaigning group.

A rank-and-file network should—as far as possible—be a network of union branches. Stronger branches should support weaker ones, or help individual activists in isolated sites to get campaigns up and running. Revitalised regional structures in UCU would be one way to support this. And while there's nothing wrong with meeting up at national or regional level, the left of UCU and its predecessor unions has always been good at warm words and big events: what we need now is to prioritise the back-to-basics union organising.

That means finding key collective issues on every campus that can mobilise our

members. Small victories—on strict time limits for reimbursement of expenses, for example—can be a good first step for bigger fights. It's easy for activists to find themselves drawn into individual and defensive trouble-shooting. Far better to campaign for a campus-wide commitment to accommodations for mental ill-health (for example) than to take on a dozen different grievances manager by manager. The central union should take the same approach, and prioritise organising members into collective action. Branches should demand support from Head Office for this work.

The rank-and-file of the union needs to make a visible case—through model branch campaigns and through its own transparency as accountable branch activists—that the union can be run a different way.

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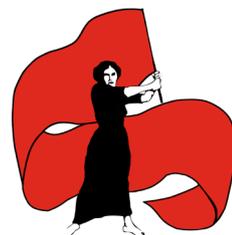
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A union that belongs to its members

By Gemma Short, Workers' Liberty industrial organiser

An often cited example of a rank-and-file network transforming its union for the better is that of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers' Union.

The change in the union came to wider attention during their 2012 contract strike. Where the strength that CORE as itself, and then through the structures of the union, had built up was put to the test — and performed spectacularly.

There are many lessons to learn from that strike: how the ballot was built for and won; picket line organisation; community involvement; clear, bold and political demands; live-streamed negotiations; and strikes kept on while all members read, debated, and voted on the final deal. I recommend reading Micah Uetricht's *Strike for America* and *How to jump-start your union* published by Labor Notes for more detail.

But the lessons from how CORE organised and won are just as important, and made the 2012 strike, and victory, possible.

CORE was not the first "progressive" or "reform" caucus to win control of the CTU. The United Progressive Caucus (the local chapter of the caucus which runs the American Federation of Teachers) which ran the union until CORE replaced them in 2010 had their origins in rank-and-file racial justice caucuses in the union. And in 2001 a reform caucus called Pro-Active Chicago Teachers (PACT) won elections and ousted the UPC. But it failed to transform the union, and after



selling a bad contract to members in 2004, UPC won control again.

Many of the activists who went on to be CORE's main organisers went through the experience of PACT and it provided them with important lessons. PACT was not an organisation with much independent life separate to its main election candidates, and when in power many of PACT's organisers became paid full-time officers (elected or not) meaning the caucus languished.

CORE set out to do things differently. CORE was not primarily an election machine. Its primary purpose was transforming the union; elections were an integral part of that but not a part that could work without the rest. CORE organised around a big issue which members cared about — school

CORE didn't stand aside from fighting in the union. If it had done that it wouldn't have grown, it wouldn't have pushed the union into action over school closures, it wouldn't have won elections in 2010, and ultimately the majority of the union's 27,000 members would have been left inside a union they were dissatisfied with. It is tempting to try and go around the union bureaucracy, the lesson from CORE is that you have to smash your way through it.

In 2010 when CORE members who were elected to union full-time positions they stepped aside from the leadership of CORE, so the caucus kept its independence. This proved crucial to stopping CORE becoming another PACT.

In 2011, a year after CORE was elected to the leadership of the CTU, right-wing free market reform group "Stand for Children" was trying to push through legislation that, amongst other things, would severely curtail the power of the CTU. Their proposal demanded 75% of members to vote for a strike for it to be legal. Newly elected CTU president and CORE activist Karen Lewis, without significant discussion of the bill by members and proper understanding of its implications, gave the union's endorsement of the bill.

When CTU members heard the details of the bill, instead of uncritically supporting the leadership they had worked hard to elect, they started a dialogue in CORE and then in the union about what to do. A CORE activist took a motion to the union's House of Delegates to overturn the union's endorsement of the bill and reopen negotiations on the bill. They won.

CORE continued to try and push the leadership into action, and used the union's House of Delegates meetings and other structures to find new activists and organise.

Instead of being defensive, or "selling" the deal to their members, Lewis and the CTU leadership accepted the decision and went back to negotiations. Lewis said "I am not the union — you guys are the union. You're saying that we need to remove our name from this, so I'm going to listen to my members."

• A detailed history of CORE's formation can be found at: bit.ly/2Kgr3n5

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