Annual report – Women Members’ Standing Committee 2018-19

At the annual women members’ conference held on 29 November 2018, the following members were elected onto the Women Members’ Standing Committee for two years: Vicky Blake (University of Leeds) and Carol Cody (City of Liverpool College). The following members were subsequently co-opted for one year: Deepa Driver (University of Reading), Elane Heffernan (New City College), Annie Jones (Sheffield Hallam University) and Megan Povey (University of Leeds).

Since the conference the committee has met three times (January, April and September).

The areas of the committee’s work over the last year include:

Abortion rights

UCU affiliates to Abortion Rights, the national pro-choice campaign. We once again sent a representative to the Annual General Meeting on 23 March. We have continued to support the ‘Back off’ campaign by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (a charity which provides abortion care, primarily on behalf of the NHS) which seeks to establish protest free zones outside centres so that women can access services without being subjected to harassment and intimidation.

A Home Office review of anti-abortion clinic protests by Sajid Javid last year sadly concluded that buffer zones weren’t necessary. As we have a new Home Secretary and Ealing came back with a positive result (the Court of Appeal upheld Ealing Council’s introduction of a Public Spaces Protection Order to put a stop to clinic-based anti-abortion activity in their borough), the Back Off supporters decided to write a letter to Priti Patel, essentially laying the failure of government at the doors of the civil servants who provided Sajid Javid with erroneous information – and asking her to re-evaluate the full set of evidence and introduce national buffer zones.

The letter points out the postcode lottery that women currently face when accessing care and that it is a national problem in need of a national solution. Since the Ministerial Statement was published in September 2018 (when the previous Home Secretary refused to take action), 32 clinics in England and Wales have experienced anti-abortion activity, with 4 of these clinics never having experienced protests before.
Decriminalising abortion in England and Wales

Abortion Rights has launched a new petition to decriminalise abortion and are urging supporters to email their MPs. Currently women in England and Wales are subject to criminalisation under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. This law was passed when Queen Victoria was on the throne. It has no relevance today and does not take account of modern medicine and the professional regulation of the medical profession.

According to research by BPAS and YouGov, only 14 per cent of people polled were aware of the current law on abortion. This means antiquated legislation is putting thousands of women at risk of becoming accidental criminal. Click this link to email your MP:
https://abortionrights.eaction.org.uk/DecrimNow?mc_cid=78aa884bec&mc_eid=09e7a98622

Decriminalising abortion in Northern Ireland

In July MPs finally passed a cross-party amendment compelling the government to bring forward regulations to decriminalise abortion in Northern Ireland.

Gender based violence

The UCU Action against Violence Against Women guide has been updated and is available on the website:

Motions from women members’ standing committee to national Congress and Sector Conferences 2019

Congress motions
Brazil and the far right
Sexual harassment

FE sector conference
Gender and workload
Gender pay gap in FE
Parents at work

UCU is a member of the Families and Work Group which is an informal coalition of charities and trade unions, chaired by the charity Working Families, who work together to collaboratively develop policy thinking and policy responses around families and work.

On 11 July Working Families and a host of other organisations, including UCU, called for the Government to consult on flexible recruitment without delay. Parents and carers who work or want to work are disadvantaged by the way the UK labour market is structured – there are simply too few quality, permanent part-time and flexible jobs. Some parents and carers are left with a binary choice between not working or taking on insecure, often low-paid work. Others who have managed to obtain flexibility in their current role on an individual basis feel unable to move on for fear they won’t get the flexibility they have now, elsewhere.

On 19 July the government announced their “Good work plan: proposals to support families”: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/good-work-plan-proposals-to-support-families

The proposals included a consultation on Parental leave and pay. This section set out options for reforming existing entitlements which could help parents to balance the gender division of parental leave.

The Transparency of flexible working and family related leave and pay policies section looked at whether employers should have a duty to consider if a job can be done flexibly and make that clear when advertising a role. It also considered options for requiring large employers (those with 250 or more employees) to publish their family related leave and pay and flexible working policies.

UCU has met with Working Families as part of the Families and Work Group to discuss the consultation and feed in views to form part of the response.
**Sexual harassment**

UCU is a member of the TUC led alliance of 20 organisations and trade unions including NEU, GMB, USDAW, Equity, RMT and Musicians’ Union, calling on the government to introduce a new, easily enforceable preventative legal duty that would require employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. We have responded to the government consultation on sexual harassment in the workplace. (See below under “Motions from last year’s conference - update” for further details on our work in this area).

**TUC Women’s Conference**

UCU sent a delegation of 12 to TUC Women’s Conference in London in March, the theme of which was “Sisters in Solidarity”. We submitted motions on “Brazil and women fighting the far right” and “An inclusive national education service: deeds and words”, both of which were carried. UCU nominated Vicky Knight from the Manchester College for TUC women’s committee and she was duly re-elected. Vicky has also chaired TUC women’s committee until her departure in the summer. She chaired a fringe meeting at the conference on “#MeToo – trade union responses to harassment in the workplace”.

As always the UCU delegation played a very active part in the conference and spoke to a number of motions in additions to our own, including: “Closing the gender pay gap”, “The gender pension gap”, “Part time and insecure working”, “Period poverty”, “Minister for women”, “Mandatory training on sexual harassment” and “The impact of SEND funding crisis on women”.

**Motions from last year’s UCU women members’ annual conference – update**

**Motion 1 - Women fighting the far right**

The women members’ standing committee took motions on this to TUC Women’s Conference and to UCU Congress. We also sent two members to the Stand Up to Racism conference in London on 19 October.

**Motion 2 - Menopause – supporting women at work**

UCU has produced guidance for branches and members on the menopause and how to support women at work:  
As we recognise that there is still lots to do to raise awareness and improve working conditions, one of our main speakers at this year’s conference will be addressing this topic and we will also have a workshop which follows up on last year’s one.

**Motion 3 - Stepping up the fight against sexual harassment**

On 26 June the TUC and an alliance of 20 organisations and trade unions including UCU, NEU, GMB, USDAW, Equity, RMT and the Musicians’ Union launched our #ThisIsNotWorking campaign. We called on the government to introduce a new, easily enforceable preventative duty that would require employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. We publicised a joint petition which received over 11,000 signatures.

The coalition wants to see the law changed so employers have a legal duty to take preventative measures to ensure their workplaces are harassment-free. The new duty would be supported by a code of practice, explaining exactly what steps bosses need to take to prevent sexual harassment – such as carrying out mandatory training for staff and managers, and having clear policies. This simple step would make a huge difference practically and would mean that the burden of dealing with sexual harassment would be shifted from individuals to employers.

**Government consultation**

On 11 July the Government Equalities Office launched their consultation on sexual harassment in the workplace which had two strands: a technical consultation for organisations and a short survey for the general public/individuals.

UCU publicised the public survey and encouraged members to fill it in. We also responded to the technical consultation which focused on the details of the legal system underpinning employers’ responsibility to protect workers from sexual harassment. The consultation explored:

- Whether the status quo is sufficient and working effectively
- What more could be done to ensure that employers *do* take all steps they can to prevent harassment from happening
- Whether employers need to be made explicitly responsible for protecting their staff from harassment by third parties, like customers and clients
- Whether interns and volunteers are adequately protected
• Whether people are being denied access to justice because of the three-month time limits for bringing an equality claim to an Employment Tribunal

• In summary UCU supports a mandatory statutory duty which shifts the burden away from individuals reporting cases to putting the onus on employers to prevent sexual harassment from happening in the first place. Only a proactive approach will bring about systemic culture change. We want penalties for employers breaching the duty and greater enforcement powers by the EHRC. Everyone in a workplace should be protected, regardless of employment status, including protection from third party harassment.

TUC hosted a roundtable with the Government Equalities Office on 18 September which we took part in.

NUS and 1752 Group

We have continued to work with NUS and the 1752 Group. Over the past year Sarah Lasoye and subsequently Rachel Watters, NUS women’s officer(s) have been regular attendees at WMSC meetings. Campaigning against sexual harassment also remains a priority for NUS. In the summer a report was launched which was the first targeted piece of research into sexual harassment and violence specifically within further education: https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/press-releases/nus-groundbreaking-report-on-sexual-violence-in-further-education/?load=5&top=0 They are currently working on a series of recommendations which will be announced in February 2020.

UCU is also working with the 1752 Group which is a UK-based research and lobby organisation working to end staff-to-student sexual misconduct in higher education. The group forms partnerships and works in collaboration with academics, student unions, support services experts, universities and national organisations to conduct research that will lead to the development of best practice guidelines for the higher education sector. The group is lobbying for robust and effective policy and procedures to be implemented across higher education nationally for the specific recording, reporting and prevention of sexual misconduct by all university staff.

UCU initiatives and campaigns

The UCU “No sexual harassment” week of awareness raising and campaigning took place 10-15 June. UCU branches were encouraged to get involved, making
use of and promoting resources. New posters and stickers were produced and made available to branches and members. The general secretary will be setting up a task group focussed on gender based violence. This was part of her election manifesto and the task groups (there will be others) are single issue focussed, time limited and research focussed.

**Motion 4 - Supporting pregnant workers**

UCU affiliates to Maternity Action. UCU has begun a joint project with Maternity Action and Unison seeking to explore the relationship between casualisation and maternity rights for women on different types of contracts, in different sectors, including HE and FE. The objectives are to:

- Raise awareness of the impact of casualisation on pregnant women workers and new mothers in terms of income, job security, gender pay gap, stress, and health and wellbeing
- Achieve policy change to improve the rights of women workers
- Equip union reps and negotiators with information and guidance on the issues in order to secure agreements that improve the situation of casualised women workers
- Disseminate best practice.

A survey has been distributed and Maternity Action will be conducting one to one interviews. We are holding a workshop on the topic at this year’s women members’ conference.
COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Chair: Sue Abbott (Newcastle University).

Vice Chair: Elaine White (Bradford College)

NEC women’s seats:

Sue Abbott (Newcastle University), Pura Ariza (Manchester Metropolitan University), Ariane Bogain (Northumbria University), Carolyn Campbell (Trafford College), Elaine White (Bradford College).

Elected at women’s conference 2017 for two years: Jennifer Dods (Leeds Beckett University), Rhiannon Lockley (Halesowen College).

Elected at women’s conference 2018 for two years: Vicky Blake (University of Leeds) and Carol Cody (City of Liverpool College).

Co-opted at women’s conference 2018 for one year: Deepa Driver (University of Reading), Elane Heffernan (New City College), Annie Jones (Sheffield Hallam University) and Megan Povey (University of Leeds).

Committee Secretary: Charlotte Nielsen, Equality Support Official.