

Congress 2009 – General Secretary’s address

Good morning Congress.

Sally Hunt, general secretary.

The people you’ve just heard are people I met last month when I visited Colombia. Its hard not to see things differently once you have been.

I met with university and college staff and students, trade unionists, and human rights lawyers, who fear not just for their livelihoods, but for their lives. What you have heard is only a small glimpse into the lives of many.

One person you didn’t hear was a man called Martin Sandoval. Martin is the [president of the CPDH human rights organisation in Arauca](#).

My meeting with Martin was held in prison, where he had been unjustly detained for more than six months. His only crime was standing up for the rights of others. He shared a small open courtyard with 245 other political prisoners - educationalists, trade unionists, community leaders, some who had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. There are three toilets, no shower, and no proper running water.

JfC asked us to meet him, to talk about his situation in front of the press, in front of government ministers including the President, which we did, and then back home to pressurise the government to release him.

Ten days ago, Martin was released.

In part that was down to a motion you passed here last year which sent me to Colombia. JfC are certain our intervention made the difference.

The reason I start with this is that this shows that this union's international work is not just talk – it really can make an impact.

As long as I have anything to do with it UCU will never forget its obligations to our brothers and sisters around the world. Our outlook is unashamedly global. Our philosophy is unapologetically internationalist.

And that – in my view - is the only way to defend education in the modern world.

By ensuring our union's commitment is not just talk – but that it genuinely makes a difference.

If this recession is global, then our response must be global. Two further examples:

Firstly, we have for the first time commissioned a report with Education International examining breaches of academic freedom worldwide. It is an important report – a reminder that the right to teach, study and learn without fear is under attack everywhere.

Secondly, just two weeks ago we signed groundbreaking international agreements with unions representing half a million university and college staff across the world.

We have committed to challenging the global market in education and safeguarding academic standards both at home and in North America, Europe, Australasia and Africa. And I am pleased to say that this week we signed an identical agreement with our brothers and sisters in the Palestinian academic union PFUPE.

Have no doubt – these are not just pieces of paper, but genuine commitments to build a lasting alliance against the privatisation of education. We are providing a serious challenge to those who see education as just another thing that can be bought and sold.

And we will go further, and use this as a base from which to campaign against the disgraceful GATT rules, that discourage public provision of education and leaves the door wide open to big business.

Because UCU believes in practical solidarity – where it matters and where it can count.

Congress we meet in the midst of the most severe recession in living memory; at a time when the reputation of politicians has never been lower. While Westminster is focused on its internal problems the recession is destroying jobs and communities – a process from which education is far from immune.

So while we must learn from both our successes and our failures in recent months, we must remain focused on our main task – to defend education. Because there is little doubt that unity within the union will be essential if we are to rise to meet these tests.

Others would delight in the thought that any failure on our part would lead to division. We cannot let that happen.

Unions belong to their members. Many of you have reminded me this week that while you agree that the defence of education must be a priority...

the union needs to consult more effectively with branches, regions, activists and members in the future.

Well I agree, and I will do something about that.

Because it is in our branches that the defence of education must begin as this year has shown.

When I went to visit our branch in Doncaster the branch was fighting against a dishonest and discredited management. I heard Hazel, a UCU member, give one of the most impassioned and persuasive arguments I have ever heard in defence of education.

Just a few weeks later this fantastic campaign saw both the Principal and finance director given their marching orders. There is work still to do, but what a great start to the campaign to save Doncaster College.

And that is not our only success. A campaign, led by UCU members and students, supported by our new regional offices and the UCU campaigns and public affairs team, forced a U-turn at Liverpool University, where eight departments had been threatened with closure.

In further education the IOU campaign continues to force colleges to the table, ending long running pay disputes with recalcitrant principals.

We will keep going until every college has made good the promise they made more than five years ago. (MORE EXAMPLES)

At Nottingham Trent University our branch fought a year long fight against derecognition. They won it too against a hard line employer in a dispute watched by everyone in higher education and beyond.

Their victory is local. Its impact anything but.

In Cardiff, a UCU organised lobby of the Welsh Assembly saw 350 of our members speaking face to face with elected members of all parties.

Winning arguments. Applying pressure. Building support.

As a direct result the Assembly agreed an extra £9 million of funding for Welsh further education.

We don't win them all. The decision to close the Social Care department at Reading University marked the beginning of the latest round of academic vandalism masquerading as restructuring.

That defeat made me angry – angry for the staff – our members. And angry for the community too – deprived of desperately needed social workers on a management whim.

It should make all of us in this union angry, but also determined to keep fighting elsewhere.

Determined to win at Cardiff university where 140 mainly female teachers are to be sacked as “too expensive” – with 250 community courses being closed with them.

Determined to win at City College Birmingham where the heart is being ripped out of the local community.

And of course at London Metropolitan University where it is the staff and students who are paying for managerial incompetence bordering on criminality.

Our membership, which continues to grow, has demonstrated that they will not be swayed from their commitment to defend education.

Employers are trying every trick in the book to subvert us. They use the recession to mask their incompetence. They exploit anti-trade union laws to try to bully us. They use loopholes to deny us our right to strike. That is why the continuing development of the National organizing Plan is so important.

Last year I said that a National Organising Plan was for life, not just for Congress.

This year we can see how it is breathing new life into our union.

We have trained 40 per cent more reps.

We have invested almost a million pounds in providing organising and campaigning support for every region, with more to come.

We have expanded our political department fourfold, to lobby and influence at every level of government, particularly in the devolved governments.

With focused campaigning and priorities democratically set by our membership, we have been able to deliver notable successes even in this turbulent year.

Your staff have delivered this in what has also been a year of huge internal change. So, I'd also like to take a moment to thank all of them who have worked so hard for members. I hope I speak for you all when I offer thanks to all those who have left our union in the past year, just as we offer a warm welcome to those who have joined us in our new headquarters in Mornington Crescent.

Thank you also to our outgoing President, Sasha Callaghan. Sasha you have worked tirelessly for our members this year. We are very sorry at the thought of you departing. Though apparently not half as upset as the Passport Agency were.

And this week marks the start of our fourth year since merger. Doesn't time fly when you are having fun.

Four years in Congress, and it is thanks to the contribution of Sasha and many others that UCU is now able to defend education and defend those who work in it.

A new structure that has devolved resources to branches and regions.

And a strong, and growing membership, with active branches and dedicated members.

And we need that strength more than ever.

Because the challenge we now face is as great as it has ever been.

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In the past twelve months we have seen the global financial system begin to fracture and contract.

The intricate linkages that held it together were found not to be strong ties, but barefaced lies. And as those lies unravelled, the global economy began to grind to a halt.

Governments are slashing budgets. In Ireland there has been a concerted attack on public sector pensions, making public sector workers bear the brunt of the bankers failure. That attack is one we should watch very carefully. Our government certainly is.

The biggest tragedy of this recession is that the unfettered greed of a few hundred has caused tens of millions of people to lose their jobs.

Our country is no different. Our sector is no different.

At a time when our country needs more investment in education not less this year's budget slashed £400 million from FE and HE.

That is equivalent to 10,000 staff.

80,000 student places ... when there is huge unmet demand in further and higher education, with more than 30,000 people wanting to study this year but unable to find a place, this beggars belief.

A member sent me a letter recently to tell me that she had just been told to either accept an increase in class sizes or be made redundant.

Well that's a disgrace.

When education should be central to pulling our country out of the recession, instead the Government is erecting further barriers to study.

And the biggest barrier of all – exorbitant charges for education – is still in place.

Can ministers honestly say that young people are not deterred from attending university or college by the realisation that they will emerge tens of thousands of pounds in debt?

I think they'll try, as will the employers but we won't. At every opportunity this union will say that education is a right, the privilege is that of our country, and all of us should take pride in paying for people to learn.

Congress, charging for education in a recession is nothing more than the rationing of hope.

In many constituencies across the country the single most decisive factor could be the votes of lecturers and their students.

Our influence is not restricted solely to votes, but in our ability to win the arguments, to influence public opinion, and to mobilise students across the country.

So we are joining with our sisters and brothers in the NUT in calling on all General Election candidates, of all parties, to sign up to our pledges to defend education.

- No limits to learning – a right to flexible funding so you can learn when you need to through your life
- No to financial barriers to education – a right for everyone to go to university based on their ability
- And to join with us in declaring education a right, not a privilege. To celebrate the right to study for its own sake.

With the election just around a corner, all parties will swear that education is a key priority for them. In reality they may do something very different.

Let me make it clear, we are serious about bringing the power of our union to bear on the political process, and we are serious about making change happen.

We have worked with some great MPs – and there are some – on our campaigns in Liverpool, Doncaster and Reading this year. In the last year we've met with the lead spokesperson of all three major parties, as well as the Prime Minister, to make the case for education. Our Early Day Motions have gained the support of hundreds of MPs.

So, we have good friends in Government and Parliament, but there are too few of them.

We have to build support and gain influence if we want to offer a credible opposition to the employers. Have no doubt that they are working hard to undermine us.

We won't put up with this more. This union must be the authoritative voice for the interests of our profession. So this year we will be working with politicians to set up the UCU Parliamentary Group, which will see the union establish a credible voice in Westminster, and extending that to Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh.

We need more than just a quick fix to pull us out of this recession. We must go beyond today's crisis, and start to think about the day after tomorrow.

Congress, it is time to set a new course to a fairer society, where everyone has the chance to share in our common wealth. With an active state that doesn't turn a blind eye to greed, but has the confidence to use its power to help its citizens, not its corporations.

And that recognises that education is central to that progress.

UCU must make the case for the defence of education.

We want to see schools, colleges and universities rooted within their communities, not serving some mythical free market in education.

Education leads to hope. Mass unemployment leads to despair, an accelerant for appalling parties like the BNP.

So today we are calling for a new deal, because what we need now is more educators, not less. There are hundreds of thousands of people who want to learn, whether through necessity or in response to changing circumstance. They need and they deserve direct and local access to education.

It is our members who will deliver this education. And they are educators by the way – not immigration officials. It is not our job to spy on foreign students.

And it is our members who understand that we can't rebuild an economy by privatising provision, closing departments, or sacking them.

UCU wants to help build a world where education is the driver of progress. But today we must be prepared to use our new strength as a renewed and focussed union to resist death by a thousand cuts.



We cannot allow our members to be thrown on the scrapheap because of other people's greed.

We cannot stand by as others sacrifice our students on the altar of the free market.

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We cannot abandon international comrades who face repression and fear.

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We must look to the future with the confidence that we can shape it.

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Together we must defend education.

Thank you.