

# **Campaigning against privatisation at UCLan**

**On 13 November 2012 the Vice Chancellor and the Board of Governors of the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) announced a proposal to change the university's corporate form by dissolving its legal status as a Higher Education Corporation (HEC) in order to form a private Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG).**

The subject of the legal status of the University was not an easy one to grasp, still less to communicate to members in a manner that avoided getting bogged down in jargon. The week prior to the announcement, the branch had participated in a joint-union seminar on the risks to the model of public higher education of privatisation. One of the workshops had been led by Jonathan White, UCU Deputy Head of Campaigns (and author of the UCU report *Public service or portfolio investment? How private equity funds are taking over post-secondary education*), and the branch invited Jonathan to speak at a packed Emergency General Meeting called for 12 December (notes from Jonathan's excellent presentation are available online at [http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/d/2/UCLan\\_Changing\\_Corporate\\_Form.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/d/2/UCLan_Changing_Corporate_Form.pdf)).

## **Countering propaganda and focusing the campaign**

At this initial stage it was vital to counter the VC's assertion that the move to CLG was not, in fact, privatisation. Staff were understandably bewildered by the contradictory statements made by the VC to the effect that the move was 'groundbreaking' (as UCLan was the first University to propose the change to a CLG), yet also represented 'business as usual', in that a number of other institutions were already CLGs (mainly institution formed as CLGs for various historical reasons prior to gaining University status).

In an effort to clarify the issues the branch emphasised the failure of the VC and Board to consult on the proposals and the potential detriments and risks involved in dissolving UCLan's HEC status. We felt it was incumbent on the branch to strike the right tone in communications with members in order to build a credible line of argument and to avoid hyperbole and scaremongering. The campaign therefore focussed on these key points:

- 1.** Failure of the VC to consult the recognised unions on a matter of organisational change
- 2.** Threat of weakened accountability and the concentration of power in the hands of the VC
- 3.** The exposure of the University's assets to private equity interests, moving UCLan significantly closer to becoming a for-profit institution
- 4.** The threat to members' terms and conditions, including pensions

These points formed the basis for the first significant salvo in the campaign: the launch of an on-line petition against privatisation at UCLan, a petition which was supported by a letter to members from the General Secretary, Sally Hunt.

## **On campus: building a joint-union campaign**

The branch approached our colleagues in the other recognised unions, Unison and Unite, with a view to building a joint-union campaign on campus. At regional level, Martyn Moss, UCU NW regional official worked closely with regional officers of Unison to help ensure that both unions were putting out a consistent anti-privatisation message.

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Attempts to garner support from the local Student's Union proved less successful, as the SU President stuck to the VC's line that the proposed CLG move was 'not privatisation'. Nevertheless, the unions resolved to work with a group of student activists who had formed 'UCLan Students Against Privatisation' (USAP). One of the first initiatives by USAP was to hold a screening of the documentary *College Inc.* (ref) followed by a discussion of the issues raised. This event brought UCU and Unison members into discussion with students and undoubtedly helped galvanise the on-campus campaign. At the same time, USAP launched their petition to run alongside the UCU one.

### **Beyond the campus: the campaign goes 'public'**

Today, UCLan is the biggest employer in the city of Preston. The University is a massive presence in the north of the city and historically its previous institutional incarnations have been firmly rooted in the civic life of Preston. It therefore seemed appropriate that the Board's plans for the institution ought to be made the subject of public debate.

To that end, UCU hosted a public meeting on 22 January, with Michael MacNeil (UCU Head of HE) sharing a platform with Kevan Nelson (Unison NW Regional Secretary) and Lyn Collins (NW TUC). Local councillors, the UCU Regional secretary, members from other UCU branches and members of the local community also made excellent contributions which resulted in good press coverage, thus raising awareness of the campaign in the wider community. This was followed up with branch officers going out to meet and talk with community groups, many of whom expressed their anger and concern about the Board's decision.

Another key development in the broadening of the campaign was seeking the support of Preston Trades Council (PTC), which offered invaluable support not just in publicising the campaign but in contributing ideas and practical assistance, such as providing venues for planning meetings. In a spirit of reciprocity, UCU in turn lent support via PTC to local anti-privatisation initiatives by PCS and Unite, including fielding a speaker at an anti-privatisation rally in March.

One of the key objectives of the unions was to try to get answers from the Board to questions concerning the rationale for the CLG proposal. Had the Board given consideration to matters of governance? What measures would be put in place to protect the University's assets? Had any alternative legal forms been considered (a community interest company, for example?). How far were the proposals being driven by UCLan's overseas ventures and the creation of a 'group structure'?

It was evident, however, that direct talks with the VC and/or the Boards were not going to be possible. At the same time, management made it clear that they could not speak for the Governors; nor were they willing to furnish the unions with minutes of Board meetings, despite the fact that the Articles of Government oblige the University to make these available to all staff and students (Management later 'relented' by making copies of the minutes—heavily redacted, of course—available in the University library!).

Taking advice both regionally and nationally, the branch resolved to put the case against the CLG move to the Governors in the form of the following document: [http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/5/5/UCLAN\\_briefing.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/5/5/UCLAN_briefing.pdf).

The purpose of this briefing was to exploit any weakness in the resolve of members of the Board, who had hitherto only heard the VC's case. We suspected that some Board members were, to say the least, uneasy about how the situation was being managed and particularly about the failure to consult staff.

The briefing was adapted to form the basis of a lobbying document sent to city and county councillors. Members were then invited to follow this up by writing to their local councillor, a 'model letter' being provided for this purpose. A draft motion opposing the CLG was submitted to sympathetic councillors on Preston City Council. UCU and Unison branch officers and the UCU Regional official also met with Preston MP Mark Hendrick, who expressed support for the campaign.

### **Stepping it up: the campaign takes to streets**

Following the launch of a local collective dispute by all three unions, it was felt necessary to build pressure on the University Board by taking the campaign out on to the streets. At a well-attended planning meeting in February it was decided to hold a 'Day of Action' on 22 March to coincide with the next scheduled meeting of the Board of Governors. The day got off to a great start with a noisy lunchtime demonstration outside the University, with staff, students, local trades unionists and community activists taking part. There were a number of speeches from members of USAP, Unison and UCU, including from the UCU NW Regional Secretary Pura Ariza. The demo made the BBC NW regional news that evening:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmYwnALwiqQ&feature=youtu.be>.

The protest was followed by a 'teach-in' in the Student Union building. This truly inspirational event brought together lecturers, students and young people from the local community in discussion about, amongst other matters, the importance to the people of Preston of the University as a public service and a civic amenity as well as an educational institution.

Finally, delegates from UCU and USAP handed in a copy of the petition (4,000 signatures) to a member of the University directorate, flanked by security guards and police officers, for delivery to the Board which was meeting at that time. It transpired that the Governors convened not in the University, but in a nearby hotel because the University 'was unable to guarantee their safety'!

At the UCU AGM on April, members discussed the next moves in the campaign. The meeting also raided funds for USAP (since it had received no financial support from the SU) and plans for further protests were already underway. Then, following a meeting of Board on 18 April, the VC announces that the plans to become a private company were to be dropped: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-22262939>.

While the branch is by no means complacent about the ever-present threat of privatisation, and whilst concerns remain about the University's overseas ventures, the UCLan branch of UCU is proud of its efforts in staving off the threat of privatisation by means of corporate change at UCLan, at least for now. The branch is grateful for the support of UCU NW Regional Official Martyn Moss; to Jonathan White in the national campaigns office; to NW Regional Secretary Pura Ariza for her mobilisation of the NW Regional Committee; to our colleagues and comrades in Unison, Unite and Preston Trades Council; to our allies and supporters on Preston City Council and the wider community; and to the student activists of USAP for their commitment and solidarity.

**Michael McKrell**

Chair, UCLan UCU