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Pay: Conference and Talks

Special Sector Conference: Keep strike action an option

More than eighty people attended a Special FE Sector Conference held in Manchester on Saturday 5 April. The conference was called to determine the next steps in the pay campaign after twenty branches requested that a special conference be called on that topic.

Delegates heard how many members did not see the outcomes of the most recent years' national (England) pay negotiations with the Association of Colleges as being in any way credible. Many delegates speaking in the debates gave examples of colleges which had failed to pay any increase for many years. In his report to conference Michael MacNeil, National Head of Bargaining and Negotiations, said "There is a problem with what is going on in the talks with the AoC. Not only are we getting really low pay increases that amount to real-term cuts but even these small numbers are not being implemented in far too many places". He continued that it was no wonder that colleges found national pay recommendations to be useful, "providing they still had the freedom to conduct local negotiations separately on implementation".

Delegates agreed motions that call on UCU to investigate the options to develop proposals for a strategy that could include targeted action to underpin and strengthen the effectiveness of pay bargaining mechanisms and to bring an initial report on these to the annual FE Sector Conference.

Delegates noted that the 2013/14 dispute continued and had been carried over into this year's talks. A motion seeking to prevent future strike action was defeated receiving very little support. Instead, delegates voted to keep strike action on the table as an option in this year's talks with the AoC.

No offer made at pay talks

The 2014/15 pay talks opened on 8 April at a meeting of the National Joint Forum where the Trade Union side presented their claim of:

- 3% or £1040 whichever is the greater
- A recommendation to colleges to become Living Wage employers
- Pay protection for a minimum of 3 years in line with school teachers (in restructures and re-grading etc)

Disappointingly, the Association of Colleges insisted they were unable to make an offer on the day, however, gave a commitment that they would bring an offer that was "without strings attached" to the next meeting of the NJF on 16 May. The AoC also said they were sympathetic to the call for a Living Wage but need to consult further with their members.

The AoC wished to reassure the unions of their commitment to have a national dialogue on pay. The trade unions emphasised that it was difficult for their members to take the national pay talks seriously when the employers' approach to the talks is with the option of deciding not to implement the outcome locally if it doesn't suit them. This "cake and eat it too" approach of not implementing recommendations combined with year after year of derisory offers is a direct attack on the credibility of the national pay talks which 85% of AoC members say think should continue.

If colleges value national pay talks the ball is now in their court to make an offer on 16 May that will lend them credibility in the eyes of our members and which will be implemented at a local level.

The employers were told of the discussions at UCU's Special Sector Conference two days earlier in Manchester where delegates chose to keep the option of strike action on the table in pursuit of our 2013/14 dispute.

FEC urges branch branches to send delegations to lobby the talks on 16 May.