

Saira Weiner for General Secretary

Manifesto 2023-24

*For a UCU transformed: democracy and
solidarity in action*

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1. For a UCU transformed: democracy and solidarity in action

The education sectors we represent – from Higher and Further Education to Adult and Prison Education – are in crisis. Since 2010, successive Conservative governments have slashed funding in Higher Education and ramped up a process of marketisation and privatisation. The other post-16 education sectors have seen cuts, college mergers and corporate takeovers. However, Keir Starmer’s Labour Party is not rushing to our rescue: Tony Blair started the ball rolling with tuition fees in 1997, and Starmer has refused to reverse any Tory policy.

UK undergraduate students are being saddled with 40-year student loans with RPI rates of interest. They will never be able to pay these off. Far from reversing the failed loans scheme, the government is now disconnecting it from the university sector, rebranding it the ‘Lifelong Loan Entitlement’ – all to further entrench privatisation and profiteering. Meanwhile, universities and colleges are narrowing student choices according to what the government likes to call ‘employability’. Arts and humanities courses in post-92 universities are being threatened and closed. FE courses are limited to meet the neo-liberal agenda. And the government, far from defending free speech, is seeking to suppress and control critical voices.

In UCU we are both educationalists and trade unionists. We are the union of publicly-funded UK science, humanities and creative industries. We have a very different vision from the politicians. We are fighting for intellectual jobs, research, and education as a public good. The world faces a series of crises, from climate catastrophe to war and migration, economic slumps and pandemics. We need a thriving, independent, publicly-funded education and research sector that allows every person to maximise their potential and contribute to a better tomorrow.

What I will do

My tenure as General Secretary will focus on delivering:

- **Democracy** – for a real member-led union
- **A strategy based on militancy** – for building membership confidence and action
- **Liberation for all** – not just equality or equity, but liberation
- **Solidarity** as a central tenet of our union
- **Getting results** for our members

As a clear signal of my position, I will take home the average wage of UCU members, not the over £110,000 that is offered. I am not standing to raise my own salary, and I hope that every candidate for General Secretary can commit to standing on the basis of an average member’s wage.

2. Democracy for a member-led union

I am standing because we need a democratic transformation in UCU.

- When members take collective action, they should have control of their disputes. Branches should run local strikes through strike committees open to all members on strike. When we take UK-wide action, we should coordinate through a strike committee constituted by members elected through their branches.
- When the union makes decisions through its democratic structures, the role of union officials and officers is to carry them out. No individual or committee – not the GS, the NEC, nor the HEC and FEC sub-committees – should block, delay or undermine the decisions of members.

The General Secretary is the most senior official of the UCU. The role is not to second-guess democracy or restrict it, but to facilitate it.

Union democracy requires well-organised branches meeting regularly, debating questions and motions before voting on them. We debate first, vote second. But we also need collective debates between and across our branches because we need collective solutions.

The current General Secretary has promoted e-ballots, where union officials ask questions and members are expected to respond in isolation, and calls that ‘democracy’. We must engage in decisions on collective action collectively. In the HE disputes we saw how this was profoundly undemocratic and sowed confusion, with questions designed to encourage members to vote to end strikes, playing into the employers’ hands and breaking up the momentum of the action.

We need to make our democratic structures more open, inclusive and participatory. All elected officers should be accountable to members.

We need to change from a top-down union to one that is bottom-up. I am standing to turn our union around, so we can win campaigns in all parts of post-16 education. This can only be achieved by a sustained grassroots campaign, which is why I am standing alongside a broad range of UCU Left candidates for the NEC.

3. A strategy based on militancy

Our union stands or falls on our ability to defend members. Negotiations are important, but we must be prepared to take action and structure campaigns that keep the threat of action alive. We won't win unless we fight. We need to mobilise members fully with the backing of the whole union to win.

Higher Education

We are seeing an emerging threat to national bargaining in Higher Education arising from the hike in post-92 TPS employer contributions. The Conservative Government has refused to cover this, unlike in schools and FE colleges. We are seeing a financial attack on HE institutions from the government that is already translating into a wave of redundancies – on top of the existing wave of cuts to arts and humanities provision. This will divide the sector at a moment when pre-92 university employers are getting a windfall from the USS re-valuation. In this context, it is a dereliction of duty for a UK-wide union to leave branches to fight institution by institution. We have to restart our national dispute and put pressure on the Government to *Pay Up For Post-92*.

We won't win unless we fight. Pre-92 union members did not win pensions back by clever negotiations. We won the first round in 2018 by taking hard-hitting strike action the VCs did not expect. We saw that once the striking stopped, negotiations started going backwards, leading to the awful 2020 valuation and eventually the April 2022 cuts. The victory we have achieved is the result of all of our campaigning – the strike action; the public campaign for hearts and minds; the ideological challenge to employers (over Defined Contributions, valuation methodology, 'de-risking' and affordability); and legal action.

We could have won the Four Fights dispute had we harnessed the power of the Marking and Assessment Boycott and sustained strikes. But the current General Secretary and her supporters blocked a timely rebalot, and failed to lead from the front. To add further insult they delayed increasing hardship funds available to members taking action, even after this was voted through NEC and HEC.

In the summer of 2022, the GS and officials abandoned members to fight alone, with individual branches running their own boycotts. But at least in 2022 branches were able to reach local deals, with branch negotiators accountable to members. In the summer of 2023, the GS did the same again, but this time all negotiations were at UK-level. Members of the Commons and the IBL factions on the HEC blocked a timely rebalot. We should have done what the Special HESC had voted for – fortnightly branch delegate meetings so members could have made the key decisions in the dispute – scaling up the democracy of 2022. And we should have used strike action and the credible threat of it to back up the MAB. There was no UK-wide response to match the UK-wide MAB. Instead, branches were left isolated to take local action in defence of members.

There are also a growing number of privatised post-16 employees (such as the Study Group Colleges), few of which have recognition agreements with UCU. We need a campaign to encourage UCU membership in this area, support new branches being established, and fight for recognition, as has been done at the Sheffield Study Group.

Further Education

FE is in crisis. Staff are leaving due to low pay and unmanageable workloads, those that remain are often looking to leave for industry or schools. In England, Principals in FE colleges have no obligation to implement the outcomes of national talks. This means staff across the sector do not have the same pay increases. The system is broken. Members need the leadership to provide a national strategy that will seek to increase national funding and provide confidence to the membership. For too long FE branches have fought their employer alone or within small groups of branches. This means the sector has become increasingly divided and as GS I will seek to level up the sector and leave no branch behind.

In Spring 2023, an aggregated national consultative ballot of FE members showed they were ready to take action. The Special FE Sector Conference called for the union to build an FE England aggregated ballot. This was repeated again at the FE Sector Conference in May. However, little happened until late August, and branches that had rarely or never taken action were encouraged to settle on local deals. There was a lack of collectivising the dispute and bringing branches together to show solidarity and discuss the next steps.

We need a serious industrial strategy to win back national collective bargaining in FE, secure contracts and not zero hours, decent pay and workloads.

Adult and Community Education

We need to plan serious campaigns for Adult Community Education, for a reversal of government funding cuts and for a national lifelong learning strategy. ACE members need national collective bargaining, secure contracts, decent pay and workloads.

Prison Education

Health and Safety needs to be taken seriously in Prison Education. Members must receive the support they need to ensure they can work in a safe environment. We must build on the improvement won on gate time, but must expand this. We must campaign for improved facilities, smaller class sizes, better pay and conditions, and against long hours.

Casualised staff, Researchers and PGRs

It is in all our interests to reduce casualisation and precarity. And it is in all our interests to cut workload by employing more staff on secure contracts.

- Hourly-paid lecturers across the post-16 education sector deserve respect, decent pay and job security. We should be campaigning for open-ended employment contracts for everyone who wants one – not agreeing to more employer consultation and non-binding agreements.
- Research staff deserve job security. Most researchers are employed on fixed-term contracts (or ‘open ended contracts with end dates’). Many can be made permanent at little or no cost, and universities can bridge between grants for the rest. Other countries offer secure jobs for research staff – why can’t the UK?
- We need a proper, funded career path for postgraduate teachers and researchers. Too many young members drop out of the sector due to poverty wages and lack of secure prospects.

Industrial action is not an ‘add on’

We are not a ‘service union’ – we are a fighting, campaigning union that must use every tool at our disposal to improve working and learning conditions. Strikes and marking boycotts hit our employers, enabling us to apply pressure and win for our members – and wins for members are wins for our students. Our pickets, protests and demonstrations bring members together, allowing staff and students to show solidarity.

Together we are stronger, and together we can support each other.

- Every union rep is gold dust, and must be listened to and not sidelined. We must defend our reps from victimisation.
- When four reps in Brighton were targeted by management during their strike, the entire branch backed them. Imagine what could have been achieved if the whole union was mobilised in active solidarity.
- Every member who takes industrial action needs to know the union has their back. We need to ensure we have a national Fighting Fund worth the name, and encourage a culture of grassroots mutual support. This could include a clearly defined, pre-notified, opt out, progressive levy of our members, freeing up other funds from within the UCU, as well as having UK-wide and local fundraising events.
- The law is stacked against us, so it is important that we use it where appropriate and challenge it where necessary. UCU does not have a coherent strategy for using the law apart from the legal scheme. We should be acting strategically to win test cases, such as on casualisation, equalities, or pay deductions, to progress the union’s interests and defend members.
- I will reinstate the legal advice helpline so members can seek advice without unnecessary gatekeeping

We need to develop a culture of participation in strikes and other forms of action. We need to convince every member that they can take part in industrial action. We should learn from other unions, like the Law Society, where the members held the line on indefinite action, and the RCN, where members in NHS Workers Say No reversed a rotten deal. We should invite the Student Workers UAW branch at Columbia University to talk about how their member-led campaign allowed them to hold out and beat their employers.

Devolved Nations

UCU has not paid sufficient attention to the differences in governance across the different nations and regions of the UK. The devolved governments of Scotland and Wales and administration in Northern Ireland has resulted in significant differences in governance and holds potential for further improvements for members. As General Secretary I would make the Devolved Nations Working Group a more effective body and increase the focus on the devolved administrations.

I will investigate the possibility in Scotland of joint membership of the UCU and EIS for members in FE in consultation with Scottish UCU members.

4. Liberation for all – from equality to liberation

The fight for liberation is about ensuring every member is able to play their part and can flourish in our union and in our workplaces. But our universities, colleges and prisons are not cut off from the rest of society. We need to be at the heart of turning the calls to decolonise the curriculum made so forcefully by the Black Lives Matter movement into a reality.

We face a Government that is one of the most right wing in memory, and an Opposition that won't oppose them. The Tories systematically scapegoat vulnerable groups for their own failures. That's why a Government that can't get the economy to grow continues to make its main headline policies about some 45,000 desperate refugees in small boats, a tiny fraction – about 1/670 – of the population.

The Rwanda plan, the use of ex-military barracks and the Bibi Stockholm prison barge to house people seeking asylum are further parts of the government's racist offensive. We have to be at the heart of resistance to these attacks.

Since Brexit, the Tory Government has made life harder for our Migrant members. Their racist policies towards migrants and refugees have targeted international students and staff. They now want to increase the earning thresholds for our colleagues and make punitive changes to student visas to appease the far right in their own party. I will defend the rights of colleagues and their family members to stay in the UK.

We say that we have to stand together, both to oppose racist immigration controls and demand practical financial support for visa fees in the here and now, and to insist that Labour repeal these policies when they come to office.

We are witnessing a horrendous war in Palestine, but the UK Government's priority is not seeking an end to this violence, but to attack our civil liberties. Our members are facing harassment for speaking out against Israel's horrific war in Gaza and our government's involvement. We have to stand up for free speech on Palestine and oppose any witch hunting of staff or students. Our Government's cheerleading of the Israeli Defence Force, verbally and through provision of military support, is shameful.

Universities across the UK are complicit in supporting Israel's war machine through military-linked research and investments. Our union has long established, clear policies backing members who support the call from Palestinian civil society for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) on Israel. As General Secretary I will ensure that members can access the campaigning resources they need, and support them if they come under attack in the media, from their employers or the government for supporting BDS.

Our employers are happy to divide and rule. At best, they treat equality as a ‘special interest’. Most of the time they turn a blind eye to harassment, bullying and discrimination, especially when it comes from senior managers or government ministers.

As a trade union we stand against war in the Ukraine and against an expansion of NATO. We argue for welfare not warfare, to welcome refugees and for climate justice.

We say that the fight for equality is in everybody’s interest. We must stand firm against all forms of racism including anti-semitism. We must show support and solidarity with the most downtrodden in society – with refugees, with the Palestinians – because we know that racism and division within our members, and within the wider working class, is a recipe for ruin. Previous generations of trade unionists chased Oswald Mosely’s fascists out of the East End of London, and the National Front out of Leicester and London.

UCU must continue its work to oppose homophobia and transphobia. We must protect the concepts of freedom of speech and academic freedom from those who seek to abuse and distort their meaning to attempt to justify transphobia. We must continue to counter those who claim that advocating for trans rights conflicts with the rights of women. Transphobic and

homophobic violence is on the rise, stoked by the Government. Much needed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act and a full and effective ban on conversion therapies remain unmet. It is crucial we ensure our campuses and workplaces are welcoming for our trans and gender diverse siblings.

There is no place for sexism, disablism and ageism in our union.

Previous generations’ working lives were shaped by the Equal Pay Act. But the fight for women’s liberation is not over. Across the post-16 education sector, women are penalised for having children, they miss out on promotions and are forced to take unpaid leave for caring responsibilities.

Our workforce is structurally segregated. Even after implementing Equal Pay schemes, we still see women members – and members racialised as black, and our disabled members – concentrated in precarious research-only and teaching-only pathways, or in academic-related and administrative positions with little or no opportunity for advancement. A similar pattern is visible in Further Education and Adult and Community Education. Many Hourly Paid Lecturers are women and racialised as black, and can lose their work with as little as 14 days notice. We cannot address inequality in staff retention (and thus promotion) without addressing casualisation.

We need to turbo-charge the Gender, Race and Disability Pay Gaps ‘Four Fights’ campaign and we need an anti-casualisation campaign in FE and ACE that campaigns to ‘level up’ and liberate everyone treated as second-class citizens in our institutions. We must continue to develop

effective guidance and campaigning to combat sexual harassment and gender-based violence on our campuses and other workplaces.

As General Secretary I will work towards

- ensuring the democratic structures are respected so all our equality standing committees strands are listened to and not sidelined
- ensure that our union is a welcoming place for all, with no place for bigotry and prejudice, and takes collective action to transform life opportunities for everyone
- the fight for liberation in wider society, in the UK and internationally
- building resistance to the government's attacks on equality, and defending migrant and trans members in particular.

The climate crisis is a key trade union issue

The devastating reality of a heating planet with more extreme weather events is now a lived experience for billions of people here in the UK and around the world. It is working people everywhere who suffer the most, in overheated work places, in the loss of homes, livelihoods and lives. But it is employers and corporations, not workers, who continue to worsen the climate crisis. The market has driven the climate crisis putting profit before people and planet, and the market will not provide the solution.

The latest UN reports talk about a ‘hellish’ future even at 3 degrees warming. Yet this Tory government – in a desperate attempt to shift the attention from the cost of living crisis and their other failures – have used the climate crisis as another front in their culture wars. They peddle lies which put the blame for rising energy bills on so-called ‘green subsidies’ rather than the obscene profits of the energy companies. Lies which suggest tackling the climate crisis is a war on drivers, rather the reality of a decades long war on public transport through privatisation. Lies that say we can’t afford the policies needed to reach net zero.

This climate injustice and inaction threatens our lives and livelihoods and our working conditions.

But the reality is that a serious and urgent government action on climate change, and public ownership of energy utilities, would cut energy bills. A mass nationwide programme of insulation would reduce energy use and keep homes warm. Investment in public transport with cheap or free fares would reduce emissions, create jobs and an accessible, integrated transport system.

In UCU we joined the student climate strikers in 2019, joined with XR protests, and joined campaigns against new oil and gas and more fossil fuels. We need more of this and should

support and build a climate movement that mobilises the huge demonstrations we need alongside the direct action which can prevent new carbon intensive projects.

We should play a role in winning the debate within the wider trade union movement that workers should be at the forefront of campaigning to keep fossil fuels in the ground and for a huge transformation of our economy to prioritise a habitable planet for workers everywhere, rather than the profits of a minority.

UCU has established a Climate and Ecological Emergency committee and has done excellent work on Green New Deal bargaining support. We must keep building these areas – I will ensure that this is high on the agenda and part of our national bargaining.

5. Solidarity is the lifeblood of our union

No-one changes the world by themselves, but when tens of thousands of us join together, we can begin to make a difference. We have to be brave, and be brave together.

As UCU members, we show solidarity with students and with other sections of the workforce. We know we are not just fighting for ourselves, but for the future of education and research.

We gain confidence from each other. Further Education members were inspired by Higher Education members, and lifted by the teachers' strikes. We have all been inspired by the struggles of NHS workers and across different sectors.

We need to encourage a culture of solidarity throughout our union. When members face redundancies in one department or college, we need to rally round to ensure they win.

The UK trade union movement has a huge fight on its hands against a Tory Government which wants to ram through more anti-strike laws under the guise of so-called "Minimum Service Levels". This same Government is trying to force through pay cuts and attacks on jobs, conditions and public services. Trade unions are right to fight back and they are right to send a clear message that we will not comply with the government's unjust new laws, and we must oppose the new wave of anti trade union legislation with more than fine words.

As the General Secretary of Unite Sharon Graham said recently, we should back our members if they break these unjust laws and commit to acting 'outside the law' if necessary. If they attempt to limit our right to strike we have to resist by any means necessary. We wouldn't have unions, the right to strike, or even the right to vote, if our predecessors had only taken action within unjust laws.

As General Secretary I will work with other unions not only to campaign against this attack on trade union rights, but to deliver hard-hitting coordinated strikes to push back the Government's offensive.

Trade Union relations within UCU

As General Secretary I also have to ensure staff working for UCU have support and good terms and conditions. I oppose the undermining of the collective bargaining agreement with UNITE for staff, and don't believe recognising a different union for higher grade staff is acceptable. As GS I will work with Unite to resolve ongoing disputes within the agreed frameworks. I will join UNITE the Union.

6. Judge me by results

As General Secretary I will be focused on delivering real wins for our members. We don't need more excuses.

We need to inject some confidence into our union organising.

We are an incredibly strong group of workers. If we stand together we can beat our employers hands down. But we have to show solidarity if any branch or group of workers is attacked.

No student comes to a university or college because they like the VC, CEO or Principal. They come because they want to learn – from our members! Pathbreaking research and transformative teaching are not done by senior managers. They depend on the intellectual activity and perseverance of our members.

Managers know that it is difficult to break strikes and boycotts by hiring inexpert scabs – instead they try to minimise their impact. They adopt the strategy of claiming our strikes don't matter: it does not matter that students lose half a taught module, or exam answers are marked by someone who did not set the question. But last summer they learned that students are not easily fooled.

Our love of education and determination to help individuals keeps our students in our courses. We need to channel the same passion in our industrial and equalities strategies to ensure we gain results. We should take ourselves seriously as defenders of post-16 education. Our students rightly see our strikes as not just defending their education but also defending their future employment prospects.

We need an organising strategy that allows all members to play their part. We need to strengthen branches, officers, committees and reps, and develop regions to help coordinate between them, share ideas and take initiatives.

We should work more closely with GMB, Unison, Unite and EIS at national and local levels to ensure every workplace in which we have a presence can effectively collaborate with other unions. We should explore joint membership with other unions including EIS.

Alongside this, we should also harness the experience of our affiliate organisations, campaign groups such as Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Stand Up to Racism, Abortion Rights and more to ensure we have solidarity and liberation at the core of our work.

We need the National Executive of our union to play its part in acting as a tribune of branches, holding the General Secretary to account, and ensuring policy is enacted.

If elected I will ensure solidarity, liberation, and respect for our members' decisions and the union's democratic structures are central to everything we do.