



# BUILD TO WIN A VISION FOR FE

# A STRATEGY AND PLAN OF ACTION FOR WINNING IN FE

Further education has finally been embraced by politicians. The rhetoric praising the importance of the sector emanating from both Labour and Conservative party conferences, and business leaders calling for collaboration with the sector, all point to a new consensus that FE is fundamental to society and country. It is almost as if public policy is catching up with what FE members have been saying for years, that our sector is a prerequisite for creating a skilled workforce, developing an economy fit for this century, and building the green economy.

Of course, FE workers have a much richer understanding of our role in society. We know the transformative power of education first-hand; that our workplaces are community institutions that change lives, not just economic forecasts.

So, while this new recognition of the sector's value is welcome, we are conscious that college Principals and group CEOs are essentially now all converted to this vision too. They have internalised the UK government's 'new' core purpose of FE in England: to boost national productivity, and are expecting our members to be 'agile' when responding to the needs of local employers.

The vision is one thing, but it is UCU's job to tell politicians, policymakers and college leaders that delivery requires serious investment.

We need investment in pay. For FE to deliver specific and highly-skilled qualifications, we need more lecturers, but current pay rates are creating a recruitment crisis.

We need investment to tackle the retention crisis caused by outrageous and entirely unsustainable workloads and the epidemic of stress-related illnesses for those who stay.

We need investment in a well-trained, secure workforce, so employers need to be shown the error of creating a 'new normal' of casualised contracts and reliance on agency workers.

To develop new skill pathways, Colleges need not only to build meaningful relationships with local and national industrialists, but they need to recognise that our members are professionals and invest in professional development for FE staff. Politicians need to stop meddling with our sector – we see the human cost when they undermine the qualifications that our students undertake. This is why we must continue to protect student choice, whilst ensuring that our members are fully prepared and resourced for curriculum changes and new qualifications.

In short, we need real change. Recruiting, retaining and retraining can't be done on the cheap. We need to keep up the pressure for real terms increases in funding focused on politicians of every party, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The political challenge is clear, but we face related challenges on the industrial front.

## FOR NATIONAL AGREEMENTS

**In England, our current negotiating arrangements with the Association of Colleges are not fit for purpose. How can they be, when colleges are free to ignore national 'deals'? This is national negotiations in name only. It is a sorry state, and a situation that benefits the employers at the expense of our members.**

We need the employers to get serious about national negotiations. We need an employers' body with the power to enforce agreements – not only on pay, but on terms and conditions also. But they won't do so out of the goodness of their hearts.

## DELIVERING AN ALTERNATIVE

**We have learned that it can be hard to mobilise members to take action around national recommendations their college has no intention of implementing. Since my election 5 years ago, we've made progress. By adopting a twin-track approach, we've been able to make strategic decisions to create pressure in the system. Our strategy means we are constantly exerting this pressure on employers locally, including by using nationally co-ordinated industrial dispute ballots.**

The FE national campaigns are gaining momentum, with more college branches in 2023 meeting the 50% turnout threshold to enable us to threaten a strike than previously. It is this strategy of nationally co-ordinated action that is putting pressure on local colleges and winning increasing numbers of deals. In 2023, we won pay rises in 60 institutions, many without having to take strike action.

The new national context gives us a new – and real – opportunity to seriously increase our leverage to deliver for our members. As the general election nears, we need to co-ordinate our political and industrial work, pointing to examples where meaningful national collective bargaining already exists.

In Wales, we can already see what can happen with a political administration that knows it needs workforce co-operation. UCU Cymru have achieved schoolteacher pay parity, national pay scales, a national contract, as well as vital



binding national agreements on workload, time off in lieu and hourly pay. Whatever the outcome of the 2024 election, we should explore the potential to work constructively with government to revitalise FE, showing how investing in the workforce is integral to the delivery of their manifesto commitments.

This is especially the case in Northern Ireland, where despite sustained strike action, we still face major challenges in FE. We have a funding crisis, a retention crisis, and are stuck with an employer body that has failed to negotiate agreements on pay and workload. Matters are further complicated by the lack of devolved assembly. The solution to the problem is not to keep attacking staff. We need to raise the profile of FE in Northern Ireland and we need mass investment.

## **BUILDING POWER**

**As a trade union, our core strength comes from the number of members we have and how well we are organised in workplaces. This affects everything: our ability to win local disputes, our ability to force the employers back into binding national agreements, and our ability to make politicians listen and increase sector funding.**

We must start with an honest assessment about the real conditions that exist on the ground. We need to celebrate where we are strong, but also acknowledge where we are weak.

We know we can be successful in rebuilding branches. We should support members in each college to campaign around issues and problems they feel deeply about. We can use these campaigns not only to build our membership but to deepen the level of engagement, using local actions and events to build a sense of collective identity.

By showing members that they are the union, that UCU is not a third party, and that their involvement is what wins deals, we can build active branches and increasing levels of confidence in collective action.

Our colleagues in prison education are an example to follow. In a sector where membership has moved from being weak to having doubled, active members would find branches with experience and learning from their experiences, so that we can continue building a serious structure on the ground. We can't be afraid to strategically think and plan for organising core institutions, as well as demanding greater resources to win – because if you take several major institutions in an area, smaller bodies will follow.

Over the past 5 years, we have been successful in identifying and training new activists, but the next step is to put serious resources into identifying, supporting and developing local reps and workplace leaders.

# BUILDING TO WIN IN PRISON AND ADULT EDUCATION

**In prison education, we need to fight against the ultimate marketised model of education – a model that puts the same value on classroom delivery as the toilet roll contract.**

We have to fight for resources for our members to be able to do their jobs – hairdressing equipment, construction materials, plants for teaching horticulture – whatever it may be. The work our prison educators do is truly transformative and their place is with the rest of us in the Department for Education; not shoe-horned into the Ministry of Justice. The work they do, every day – in the toughest of circumstances – matters.

We must continue to fight for sustainable workloads and safe workplaces for our prison educators. Some of the conditions they tolerate are hair-raising. We desperately need a national prison educators' contract, so that prison governors are forced to take each of our prison education providers equally seriously and close the pay and conditions gap so often prevalent.

We need everyone in our union to hear – and really recognise – the specificities of this key sector to support our members in prisons. This must happen through an intersectional lens; it is in prisons that our Black members are suffering the most appalling racism. Sexism and homophobia are commonplace. And the bigotry our members are subjected to is not taken seriously by employers. We must change this.

In adult education, it is UCU's job to tackle casualisation. We must fight for tutors who are expected to move from site to site through lunch breaks, while preparing papers for classes in the boots of their cars. This is because they don't have a fixed desk or a work laptop. It is a shameful indictment of the system.

We must tackle the fact that courses are slashed and jobs are constantly at risk, as in prison education. All of this is the hidden disgrace of adult education. Uncertainty and instability means our members oftentimes cannot apply for a mortgage or start a family, while doing such crucial work in our communities.

Our adult and community education membership might be small, but it is mighty. We are taking on the disgusting practice of fire and rehire and continuing to fight for better pay and conditions. This is a sector that doesn't have any form of national bargaining, meaningful or otherwise.

Our adult education UCU branches are vulnerable to getting lost in the might of local authorities. We need to find a better way for their voices to be heard, so we can build and grow.

## SUMMARY

**Building and organising are the most important things we need to focus on in FE. For that we need to increase membership, density, local strength, representative structures, and move forward with a clear plan that everyone supports.**

This document sets out how I believe we can do this. It has been co-written with David Hunter who is running for Vice President for FE. It is the product of my years of experience as your general secretary, and the thousands of conversations we have had with UCU members. Re-elect me, elect David Hunter as VP, and the full platform who are backing my **campaign**.

**Let's get to work.**