

UCU general secretary, Jo Grady: introductory remarks to the National Executive Committee meeting on Brexit

I want to introduce this debate by talking about where I think the membership is on this issue and what we can and can't do about it as an NEC, based on existing UCU policy.

How have we tried to gauge the views of our members on Brexit and form a consensus?
Not very precisely

A consultation of members about this time last year found that 89% of the 25% of members who voted wanted a second referendum on any withdrawal agreement.

This does not automatically mean that our membership wants to remain, although there tends to be a lot of overlap between people who want a second referendum and people who want to remain.

However, I do think it suggests that our members are unlikely to be happy with the uncertain situation we are facing now, where we are facing the prospect of crashing out with no deal, or potentially a referendum choice between no deal and remain.

Since last year, Brexit has not played a huge part in our union's democratic deliberations or campaigning. Having said that, it was quite a prominent issue in the general secretary election campaign. Members probably raised the issue more frequently than any other.

I talked a lot in that campaign about the threats Brexit poses to funding and to the status of students, and tied the issue to that of the hostile environment more generally, to remind our members of the threats that are now facing both EU and non-EU migrant staff. When members asked me about a second referendum, my answer was to endorse it in principle and say that UCU should campaign for remain if possible, but I also expressed a lot of concern about the terms of that referendum, who was setting that question, what kind of deal was on the table, and when we want it to happen. I don't think those questions have gone away in the intervening months.

What I've done in the meantime has been summarised in two emails I've sent to members, one on 29 August and the other on 2 October:

- UCU released a statement condemning the prorogation of parliament as anti-democratic

- I corresponded with the prime minister, the home secretary and the education secretary to seek assurances about the status of non-UK EU citizens after 31 October, and we produced a template letter along similar lines for members to send to their MPs and other representatives
- I encouraged eligible members to apply for the EU settled status scheme, which, whatever its many flaws, looks like it might be just about the only official protection they might get against this government's border enforcement procedures if or when we leave the EU
- I've also secured a guarantee from Gavin Williamson, the new education secretary, that the new injection of funding for further education will still be made available even if we exit with no deal – and that it should prioritise spending on staff
- finally, I've also spoken at several events relating to Brexit, including: an anti-prorogation demo at Downing Street; The World Transformed Conference which ran alongside Labour Party conference in Brighton; and the Labour Party conference itself.

In those public speaking engagements I stressed the importance of protecting and indeed strengthening freedom of movement in any leave or remain scenario, as well as the other specific threats which Brexit poses to our sector. I also talked about the need for any outcome, leave or remain, to be decided democratically rather than being forced on us through devices like the prorogation. This was my way of trying to say something and to rally people on the issue while remaining within the broad outlines of UCU policy.

As we look ahead to the motions which NEC members have submitted to this meeting, I'll just say this: my impression from last year's consultation and the activities I've engaged in since then is that if we want to show some leadership and campaign more actively, we will get support from our members who have told me that they would like to see a focus on issues around freedom of movement and protection for migrant staff. This might naturally lead us towards advocacy for a remain or soft Brexit outcome but it doesn't necessarily force us to support one of those or the other, and it also doesn't force us into any specific position on the Labour Party's current approach to the issue.

Labour, as you know, supports a general election followed by a second referendum on a Labour-negotiated deal versus remain, with the party unsure as to which option to campaign for until after the deal has been negotiated. Personally I support this position as the least bad stance to take, but I can see that it could prove divisive for various reasons. The only aspects of Labour's platform which I think the majority of our members might support are its opposition to no deal and its unequivocal support for freedom of movement as agreed by the recent conference. However, it remains to be seen whether a Labour general election manifesto will actually include that policy, as I indicated in my last Brexit email.

Freedom of movement isn't just a slow-burn policy issue. It is already causing a great deal of harm to our non-EU members and it could very soon become a full-blown emergency for EU citizens resident here. In the last few days the security minister Brandon Lewis

indicated that EU citizens who haven't been granted settled status by the end of 2020 could be deported. That's more than a million people according to the latest official figures, and it clearly covers a lot of our own members.

That leads me to the only other thing I want to say before we start. We have to be extremely careful about any decision that might look like an endorsement of active political campaigning for any party in a general election. This is not just because it might well go beyond UCU policy and it isn't the job of the NEC to create policy. It's also because of the rules restricting unaffiliated unions like ours as far as electoral campaigning is concerned. But it's also, finally, because I believe that much of our membership is dissatisfied with the way Labour has handled Brexit and especially with its triangulation on freedom of movement, something which UCU has consistently advocated for but Labour has not.

Jo Grady
UCU general secretary

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