

# *Campaigning against privatisation at Essex*

**How the Essex branch of UCU campaigned successfully against a joint venture between the University of Essex and INTO University Partnerships, by Steve Sangwine, NEC and former president of Essex University UCU.**

This is the story of how a union branch, aided by the union's campaign unit in London, ran a successful campaign against a proposed privatisation of its English Language teaching. The story begins in December 2007 when the branch was told that the university was in discussions with INTO University Partnerships Limited about a possible Joint Venture which would transfer the university's 'provision' in teaching of English as a foreign language to the Joint Venture.

This would have meant that staff in this subject area would no longer be employed by the university, but would be transferred to the Joint Venture company on new contracts, and that INTO would build a residential and teaching building on campus, sitting on land transferred to the Joint Venture.

The branch mobilised to fight this proposal, and we succeeded—the Joint Venture never happened, and INTO's apparently unstoppable progress within the UK higher education system was slowed down when the university announced in October 2008 that it would not be proceeding with INTO, but would keep the teaching 'in-house'.

## **Focusing the campaign**

Our campaign had to be directed against the decision makers: the university senior management team, and the Council—the university's Governing Body (Essex is an example of a UK University with a Royal Charter, making it nominally autonomous, and without a Council decision to proceed, no Joint Venture could be started).

However, the campaign also had to spread information and mobilise staff and students against the proposal, and put pressure on Council and the senior management from other sources, for example local members of the UK Parliament.

The targeted department had recently been renamed from the English Language Teaching Centre to the International Academy, the name it is still known by today in 2010. We organised meetings with staff in the department to brief them and to get their support for the campaign. We also organised an Emergency General Meeting of the union branch in mid-February, only seven weeks after finding out about the proposal. We debated a motion opposing INTO, and obtained a mandate from the membership to campaign vigorously against the proposal. This was not difficult, but it did require information to be gathered—members need to know what is being proposed and why it is a bad thing for members. We voted by secret ballot at the Emergency General Meeting because members in the International Academy were worried that management would note which way they voted. The result was a massive rejection of INTO, and the branch wrote to the Vice-Chancellor (the university's most senior executive) asking him to cease negotiations with INTO. He declined, and the campaign continued.

Throughout the months of the campaign, the union was involved in regular briefings with management representatives, but we were kept at arm's length behind a veil of commercial

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secrecy—we asked to meet INTO representatives, but this request never resulted in a meeting. Staff who were involved in discussions were shown small pieces of the business plan for the Joint Venture, but not the whole document, and the union never saw any of it.

What seemed to be seductive to the senior management was the offer of capital investment from INTO, the provision of a new building, and recruitment of so-called “high quality” international students paying high fees (in the UK Higher Education system there is a huge differential between the fees paid by UK and European Union students, and those from outside the EU—roughly speaking £3500 against over £11000 per annum). INTO offered access to a network of recruiters that was claimed to be more effective than the university’s own recruitment activity. We said “why not work co-operatively with other universities like Essex as part of a recruitment consortium”. We were told “that was not going to happen” (not that it wouldn’t work, because it can and does work for some groups of universities—it just wasn’t part of the attractive INTO-style model).

### **Putting pressure on the decision-makers**

We compiled and published (on our website) an open list of questions about INTO and the proposal, designed to embarrass the management and make people think about what was going on. We started with a list of questions that had been asked at Oxford Brookes University (remember the union branch there had also campaigned against INTO and won) and we added to it. There were gems like this one:

***“Will members of the Board of the Joint Venture be remunerated in money or in kind for their work on the Board?”***

In other words, are these senior managers being tempted into the deal by personal gain? Note that we never claimed they would be – we just wanted people to think about this and realise that the interests of the university might not be the only motivation for entering into a deal.

We wrote to members of the university Council with the list of questions and with our concerns about the proposal, and here we had to ask the university for the contact addresses—just in case they wouldn’t play ball, we compiled our own list from public sources and from personal contacts, to make sure we would have a channel of communication with individual members of the Council.

Our national campaigns unit ran an Internet ballot on the UCU website for all Essex staff—this was more like an open petition than a ballot, since staff were not registered, but it was very effective. 90% of those voting were opposed to a deal with INTO, and over 500 voted (more than our total membership in the branch, which was significant in showing management that opposition was really widespread). We contacted staff by email—by sending an email from our Head Office email system to a list of all staff at Essex. This really angered management—they questioned us as to how we had obtained the mailing list—in fact it could be obtained from a printed telephone directory, so was clearly not private. To follow up the email, we sent a printed letter to all staff, delivered by Royal Mail—this cost the union a few hundred pounds in postage, but the management had no possible complaint against it, since the addresses were available on the university website. Creating the mailing list took some effort, but distributed around enough people it doesn’t take long—and this is crucial—mobilise people as part of the campaign, and give them tasks to do. People will be willing to do work as long as they can see how it fits into the campaign. The result of this campaign of email and letters was that the Vice-Chancellor was forced to speak—his first email to all staff about INTO followed soon after the letters were sent out. Mobilising wide support was crucial—a classic tactic of senior management to deflect union campaigns is to claim that

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the union does not represent all staff, is in a minority etc. Showing that we had wider support than just our own membership prevented these claims being made.

What else did we do? We wrote to local members of Parliament. We leafleted the university car parks—to get the message across to staff who didn't read the emails. We wrote to the local media, including radio stations, newspapers. Even the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* ran a story about INTO and Essex after the decision to reject INTO. The General Secretary of UCU, Sally Hunt arranged a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor—in the event the meeting never took place, because the decision to reject INTO happened first, but it represented another brick in the wall. We fed information to other branches and to Head Office, and we received information from others in turn, much of which was useful in building a case against INTO. We researched the company we were fighting against. For example, we found out that they owned a small executive aircraft—and we publicised this—here was a company that was prepared to spend money flying its executives around by private airplane, as if it was a multinational with a huge budget, when clearly it wasn't. And where would that money be coming from—the students of course, paying the high fees!

### **Key points**

Significant things in running a campaign like ours against INTO are:

- Remember who you are trying to influence directly (the decision makers!), and who you are trying to influence because they in turn can influence the direct decision makers.
- Use the web, email, media, Parliamentarians or Congressmen/Senators to put pressure on the decision makers and spread awareness of the issues.
- Push the issue out into the open, public domain. Counter secrecy by going public and try to force the management to go public too. Private companies hate transparency – maybe you can force them to walk away from a deal even if your management wants to sign one.
- Find out about the private company. Publish information about them that you can gather from public sources, but stick to facts or you could face legal action against you.

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