



A UNION FOR THE MEMBERS

UCU GENERAL SECRETARY ELECTION 2024 MANIFESTO

BY JO GRADY

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A UNION FOR THE MEMBERS: JO GRADY FOR GENERAL SECRETARY

1. FOREWORD

Four Prime Ministers, a pandemic and the most concerted attack on workers since the Miners' strike. This has been the backdrop to my first term as your general secretary.

Despite this, we have:

- Won two UK-wide higher education ballots.
- Delivered the biggest pensions win in UK trade union history in USS.
- Pushed back against the government more than any union during Covid.
- Won dozens of ballots and settlements in further education.
- Doubled our membership in prison education.
- Stabilised overall membership as it's fallen across the movement.
- Significantly raised UCU's profile.
- Set a climate and equality agenda of which we can be proud.

This is just the beginning, and in this manifesto I set out a fresh and dynamic agenda that will continue to build our union. This is a coherent, detailed, professional plan for change, with all UCU members at its core.

More detail about my vision and future strategy for higher education can be found **here**, and further education (encompassing prison and adult education) can be found **here**.

2. 2018-2024 – WE HAVE CHANGED OUR UNION

A lot has changed in the last few years. Under my leadership, the majority of FE branches have achieved decent pay offers without taking a day of strike action, because employers knew we have built branches that could not be ignored. We have also revolutionised the way in which we ballot in higher education, alongside balloting in adult education for the first time in years, winning ballots in prison education and doubling our density there.

But winning ballots isn't everything. We need to win disputes too. We have done this, and we should celebrate those wins. But we haven't won everything you deserve. This manifesto presents a strategy for each of the sectors we represent, and outlines how we will build membership, density, solidarity, and ultimately win on the issues you regularly tell me matter to you. Not all of this will be done via national ballot after national ballot.

Since I was elected I have never shied away from being a leader who will battle for our members, whether that is on the news, in parliament, or on picket lines. I promised you I would be a different kind of general secretary, and I have been.

This manifesto assesses the progress that we have made, against the agenda for change you voted for when you elected me back in 2019. I want to recognise what we have won and be honest about where we have not. I will outline the fundamental challenges that we still face as a union, and what we must do if we are to win the transformational change that I know we all want. And that I truly believe we can achieve.

3. A MEMBERS' UNION

3.1. **Building participation**

Under my leadership UCU has changed in several ways. We've elevated the status of FE and prison education. We are a respected and key player in the trade union movement. We welcome engaging in national ballots, and we feature prominently in the media.

Next I want to see us create a much more democratic and pluralistic culture, widening participation at all levels and creating a sense of ownership of the union by all of its members.

Only a small percentage of our members participate in the democracy of our union. Not enough are active in branches, and the representatives that attend and vote at democratic events on behalf of members are often not properly answerable to those members. Far too many members find our internal culture to be byzantine, off-putting and needlessly antagonistic. The scale of this problem has become very apparent to me in the last four years, as I have fielded questions from so many members asking how decisions are made and by whom.

To be a union that takes effective action, we need to engage mass numbers of members. Our structures are archaic and inaccessible: we would not design them this way if we were making them today. We also have rules that allow our decision-making bodies to declare contradictory or unimplementable decisions.

For more people to feel like this union is truly theirs, this needs to change.

If re-elected, I will commission a formal review to examine all current structures, with the aim of modernising the union. In making it more accessible and democratic in a meaningful sense, we can deepen the process of UCU becoming a truly member-led union. This will involve UCU members, committees, and officers. All recommendations will be put to the membership for a vote.

3.2. Building the union

The past five years has been an exceptionally difficult period for our membership. Whether in higher, further, adult or prison education, UCU members have found themselves facing an employers' offensive, backed by a vindictive government happy to endorse these attacks.

But our union has been well-placed to defend our members and education. The move to national ballots in HE has seen us claiming two national ballot wins. And our improvements in balloting more generally have seen UCU winning more strike ballots than any other union. We have delivered the biggest ever coordinated strike action in further education.

In prison education, the hard and patient work of building density saw us doubling our membership and winning a ballot during the pandemic, shocking the employer. In further education, a cast-iron commitment to taking the sector as seriously as higher education has seen us committing more staff than ever to the recent coordinated ballot. And while we can't claim that striking has won us everything, our demonstration of strength has delivered massive victories, such as the USS pensions rise – the biggest pensions victory in British trade union history.

In short, we have overcome serious demoralisation in our own ranks to show that a better education system, with better workplaces, is possible. This has all happened because of the bravery, enthusiasm and dedication of our membership.

We must now fully commit to building our numbers. When I took office, our membership numbers were inflated by thousands of non-paying members, and a membership dues system that meant that those earning less paid proportionally more than those earning more. Neither of those things is right, so we moved towards a more progressive system of membership dues, while phasing out free memberships. UCU's membership numbers have now stabilised. My first term was marked by modernising this system.

My second term will be marked by investing to grow. I will increase the resources available for recruitment materials, communications linked to recruitment and training. We must also keep reviewing our subscriptions framework to ensure it is appropriate and fair.

4. DEFENDING EDUCATION IN THE UK

In UK education, we face systemic problems stemming from the marketisation of education. But we can develop funding models that don't rely on exploitation to succeed, and create an environment where staff work and live in dignity, where all students can feel assured their chances in life won't be damaged by their ability to stump up cash or by disruptive policymaking from politicians or management.

In my four years as this union's general secretary, these are the solutions I have been proud to fight for. Throughout this time, UCU members have engaged in unprecedented numbers to show their opposition to the unfolding disaster in our sectors. They have demanded change in their workplaces. This has been seen in higher education with the transferral of 4,800 staff from insecure to permanent contracts at the Open University; in further education, Nottingham College beat a vindictive attempt to fire and rehire its staff; in prison education, our Novus members won a health and safety ballot during Covid, and as this document went to press, we are on the brink of overturning fire and rehire in one of our colleges in adult and continuing education.

Whatever the dispute, our union will direct the resources needed to support members on the ground to fight back against attacks, and will also launch proactive campaigns to improve terms and conditions.

5. ESTABLISHING A BALLOT- WINNING UNIT

UCU has won more strike ballots in recent years than any other union. Our national strategy, coupled with the work that takes place on the ground, is a formidable combination.

We can, however, always do more. And we will. Since I was elected in 2019 we have already introduced a range of innovations that have increased our turnout.

If re-elected I want to reshape the resources at UCU headquarters to build a ballot-winning unit, bringing together the staffing, systems and experience we need to make sure we win every single ballot that we call. This unit will be available to support local branch disputes and lead our national work in this area.

6. THE COMING YEARS – BUILDING A STRATEGIC UCU

In higher education, we have made tremendous progress. But I believe we must break out of a strategy which, for too many members, feels like a repetitive process of balloting and action by too-distant decision-making bodies. We must never shy away from serious fights. But we weaken our capacity for the struggle if we refuse to recognise the real toll the past few years has taken on the fighting spirit of our members.

In this new period, I firmly believe that the toughness and resolve of our members should be redirected towards building UCU further on the ground. The next time we fight, we need wider networks of solidarity. We need a workplace density that intimidates every employer, an industrial strength that can grind universities and colleges to a halt – in partnership with a fighting student solidarity movement, sharp communications strategies, and political influence. For this sustained campaign of recruitment and deep development, the union's leadership will give everything that branches and members need, regardless of their current size or strength.

It is fair to say that the current cycle members feel locked into – ballot, action, ballot, action, pause – has been a fatiguing one, and has led to many members feeling like the union is being driven by small, unrepresentative groupings of people who want to take action for action's sake. We need to break this cycle.

I have argued this repeatedly in our union's committees and other decision-making structures. But for many of you on the ground, it may be the first time that you have heard it from me. After several years of constant activity, with no strategic reflection or pause, it is clear to many of you that our union needs to breathe, rebuild, and regroup. This doesn't mean rolling over.

In further education this means sticking to the plan of building branch by branch until we reach a point where we can take on every employer together, and finally push for the systemic change we deserve. See more about my detailed plans for FE in my strategy document.

In higher education this means listening to what you have been telling us about what has worked and what has not. I was pleased to see the Higher Education Committee vote recently to take a more medium-term view on how we build to win on pay, casualisation, equality pay gaps, and workload. We will continue to fight on all these issues over my second term, but with a more strategic approach that aims to secure real change. **Read more about how I see that working in my strategy document.**

In every wing of our union, I will ensure the relevant democratic bodies develop a comprehensive sectional strategy that can win, and show it to members before we ask them to vote yes in a ballot. The current practice of asking members to vote yes, and then telling them what action they will take, isn't democratic.

I want to lead a union where you are involved in every step of the process – one in which our committees, knowing what you want, make evidenced decisions.

I will present a growth strategy that will lead to a mass participation ballot, and a rolling-out of both orthodox and unorthodox strike action – should we wish to take it – which will lead us to victory. Check out my detailed strategies for **HE** and **FE**.

7. REVOLUTIONISING OUR LOCAL BARGAINING

The heart of our union is our branches. They are the first line of defence against attacks such as threat of redundancies, course closures, restructuring, mergers, fire and rehire and much more. But we don't just fight reactive battles.

Our branches also launch proactive campaigns for recognition, on workload, equal pay, casualisation, and health and safety. For example, over the last few years we have seen a landmark equal pay agreement at the **University of Bristol**, and recognition at multiple sites, including a historic deal at the **University of Cambridge**. We've also seen countless local pay deals in FE and prison education. All of these have been achieved by tireless work in branches, and crucial data provided by the union.

While there will always be battles that we choose to fight on a coordinated basis, a key part of my plan for **HE** and **FE** is to facilitate successful local bargaining.

Under my leadership UCU will launch, and train all our reps to use, a new system that has been produced in-house called the Organising & Bargaining Information System (OBIS). It brings together a number of data sets to help branches and regions develop effective organising and bargaining.

Democratising access to data like sector finances and branch membership will allow branches to harmonise local bargaining claims and local organising plans, and empower branches to cut through financial arguments made by their managers. The newly-developed OBIS will support every UCU branch to lodge local claims on any topic covered by OBIS, so that every branch can make local gains on key issues.

8. EQUALITIES AND LIBERATION

Working to ensure that our workplaces and communities are equitable, accessible and just is essential to who we are as a union. I am proud that our work has been framed by two key principles from trade union and social justice movements – “nothing about us without us” and “an injury to one is an injury to all”.

We have led the trade union movement on supporting trans and non-binary people. When I took office in 2019, our union lacked definitive leadership on this key issue. Now our position is beyond doubt. I am so proud of this.

We also listened to migrant members who raised their voices to highlight the injustices of the hostile environment, to reveal the massive and unequal costs they bear just to work here, and the barriers to union activism they face. But we didn't just listen: we acted, and I'm proud to have supported the creation of the first migrant members representative structure anywhere in the trade union movement.

Xenophobia and racism fuel this government. We have been at the forefront of seeking justice for those targeted by government policies, including opposing the governments hostile environment and Prevent. We have campaigned against and will continue to close race and ethnic pay gaps, and to highlight the lack of Black women professors in higher education.

But we won't stop there. Black women are leading from the front in prison education, where their experiences of overt racism, micro, aggressions, marginalisation and lack of promotion opportunities is reminiscent of the 1960s. Our task group report on sexual violence also revealed that Black, disabled, women, LGBT+, and insecurely employed staff were all more at risk of sexual violence in the workplace.

All of this underlines that we must also work to tackle the intersection of inequalities, which leave too many of our members subject to multiple forms of discrimination.

In addition to our big-picture campaigns, we have also been working behind the scenes to develop toolkits and training for branches to change their local cultures – from an LGBT+ charter that helps branches implement real change in workplaces, to a reasonable adjustments passport, which prevents disabled members having to keep re-explaining to management the changes they need to be able to do their job.

If re-elected, I will expand our equalities work. We are very good at producing reports outlining the scale of discrimination and injustice our members face, but we must run more equality-focussed campaigns. We have pursued a vast number of industrial campaigns because they have been necessary, and we must build up our capacity to do more on equality-related issues. I will ensure that an intersectional analysis is hardwired into all we do, and that we run annual campaigns with key objectives in our equality areas that force our employers into practical action. I will also commit to monitoring cases of racism, Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism to inform our work and develop the support structures our members need.

9. COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA

In the past five years, UCU has evolved into an organisation with a highly effective media strategy. In major op-eds, television and radio appearances, no other union has managed to gain such consistent coverage that reflects with clarity and detail why our members are in dispute. As general secretary I have represented you on programmes as diverse as This Morning and Question Time. As a result, many more people now know who and what our union stands for.

I have led from the front in utilising 21st century communications strategies to build up the confidence and combativity of our membership. Like never before, our communications strategy has encouraged action, linking up and empowering newer or quieter members.

We have used social media to allow members to discuss new developments, spread viral content and hold dozens of online live events. This work has made the union more connected and transparent. It has also developed our presence outside of the union, with videos and pictures regularly reaching millions of views.

We can always do more.

To that end, to build on the real advancements in our communications, we need to invest in a new email system so that members receive communications at the same time. We also need to also ensure that our communications are available in different formats simultaneously, to ensure accessibility. We need to develop a communications strategy with decisive input from branches, representatives and members. If we seek to empower workers, everything we do in communications must be directed towards this goal.

10. OUR POLITICAL, INTER-UNION, AND INTERNATIONAL WORK

10.1. **Political strategy**

In recent years we have built incredibly strong political relationships. We have influence in Westminster and the devolved nations. This has seen us deliver Select Committee hearings, questions in parliament, support for our ballots and campaigns and gave us the platform to apply massive pressure during the Covid pandemic.

I want us to do more. We are in the advanced stages of building a UCU general election strategy where we will ask politicians to sign up to our charter for education as a prerequisite for our support. We will also engage proactively in the next elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I am pledging to build a new political education programme to equip branches to build political relationships and pressure at local level. Our reps and members should also have the opportunity to learn about our trade union history; when we understand where we come from, it helps us progress.

10.2. **Movement Strategy**

In the past few years, UCU's standing in the wider trade union movement has significantly grown. Alongside other sister unions, we have engaged in mass campaigns against precarity, austerity and racism. We have been successful in many branches in developing a real culture of inter-union solidarity, with more of our branch activists working closely to strengthen other peoples' disputes and picket lines – an “everybody for everybody” culture. Our members are also some of the most identifiable trade unionists in social movements across the country. But we can't assume a change of government will automatically lead to better trade union conditions. We have to be ready to make this happen.

All of our connections on the ground – via solidarity groups, trades councils, and student-worker activist networks – need to be developed and supported, and I pledge all the assistance this union can muster. I will also be pushing for much closer liaison with fellow trade union leaders, so that should the time come, we can act in a coordinated fashion to exert maximum pressure on any incoming government.

10.3. **International Solidarity**

The reach of our international solidarity work recognises no borders. We know that Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. We know that support we have shown to our siblings in Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Ukraine, Morocco does not go unnoticed. We continue to be a proud member of Education International and the European Trade Union Committee for Education and we can be proud of our 'Global Dispatches' section on the UCU website.

As GS, I will always offer unflinching support to our international friends and continue to hear from migrant members in all of our workplaces who may have family and friends in struggle back home.

11. GETTING INVOLVED

11.1. *Task Group on Class*

A key component of my last set of election promises was about widening membership participation. In the face of internal opposition, I launched the sexual violence task group. This was a huge success for the union and led to the TUC replicating our approach. The level of applicants to participate in the task group was unprecedented, and the research undertaken was outstanding. We have begun to implement the recommendations of that report, and I will further that implementation if re-elected. We cannot afford to go back to a time when sexual and gender-based violence was not treated seriously in the trade union movement.

I want our next task group to tackle the issue of class. **Our own research demonstrates that 3 in 5 working class staff in post-16 education say their class is a barrier to career progression.** Staff with protected characteristics (of which class is not included under the Equality Act 2010) were more likely to say that being working class is an additional barrier, highlighting the intersectional nature of discrimination. Yet despite this, class is rarely included in motions that are debated in our democratic meetings. Facing this issue is another way to build the union, increase participation and ultimately take decisions that will set a benchmark in the trade union movement. There are already some fantastic organisations working on this and we need to pool our resources to tackle it.

11.2. **Training for UCU Representatives**

Over the last four years we have hugely increased the number of trained members. We have revamped our core training to develop the skills of reps and expand capacity on issues like equality and health and safety. Alongside this, we also offer training on a range of innovative subjects, such as Climate and Sustainability, challenging sexual harassment and violence, and challenging casualisation. We know not everyone can dedicate days to attend training or travel, so we now offer hybrid delivery and shorter sessions aimed at allowing people to dip into training. We also offer free guides [<https://cpd.web.ucu.org.uk/free-guides/>] on a number of topics such as classroom management and peer review.

I will keep investing in our training throughout my next term, to ensure it reflects the issues that matter to us as a union, and is accessible and inclusive to all.

11.3. **The Climate Emergency**

The consequences of the climate emergency are not distributed equally. Climate change is making immigration regimes in countries like ours even more oppressive. Climate change is a gender issue too, with the UN calculating that 80% of people displaced by climate change are women. Our union has a strong track record on leading the rest of the trade union movement to take climate change seriously. In 2019 we were the lead union behind a TUC motion that led to a 1-day climate strike in the UK, and we have led the way in submitting green new deal bargaining claims in our workplaces. We have a substantial green reps training programme, and in the last year, UCU has also established a climate and ecological emergency committee.

I want to harness the skills and knowledge that we have in our membership to establish a panel of green curriculum ambassadors to help the union devise materials that enable other educators to take their current curriculum and 'green-proof' it. Neither the government nor enough employers are leading from the front on this. So we will. UCU members will. We will empower each other to change, and in doing so revolutionise our course content together.

12. MY ROLE AS GENERAL SECRETARY

I promised you I would be an extremely visible general secretary, and I have. I have met thousands of you since I was elected. Before the pandemic I had begun holding regular mass member meetings in various locations around the UK. I have been on hundreds of picket lines, and you will frequently see me in media appearances. I love to come to branch meetings and support members on the ground.

I fundamentally believe in your right as members to have direct access to the leadership of the union.

This is why, if re-elected, I will immediately build on my manifesto platform by visiting branches and members in every region and devolved nation of the UK. I promise to re-establish the mass member meetings. My second term will not be any less visible. If elected I also promise to continue to donate a portion of my salary to the UCU fighting fund every year. During my first term I have donated £10,000 per year.

13. MY PERSONAL MESSAGE TO YOU

I want to finish this manifesto with a personal message.

UCU is the greatest vehicle for change that I have ever belonged to in my life. We have won pay settlements, prioritised health and safety, made history for pensions equality, built density. We have also had some difficult moments.

With all of that considered, I stand before you with absolute confidence and say that I am the right person to continue leading our union, and the right person to build it. If you re-elect me, you will always have a general secretary whose first and last thought will be our members.

I'm not governed by any outside organisation. I answer to UCU members, and UCU members only.

To complete the transformation of our union, I need you. We need to vote for David Hunter as Vice President, and for the full platform who are backing my campaign [here](#).

You can read more about my plans, ideas, strategies and how to get involved at [here](#).

We are going to continue to build a union for you, the members. If I win, we all win.

You can sign up for regular email updates at [here](#).

You can follow me on [X](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), and [TikTok](#). You can also find me on Bluesky.

You can join the FE campaign WhatsApp group [here](#) and HE campaign WhatsApp group [here](#).

In unity,



Jo Grady
General Secretary

14. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the last four years I've spoken to thousands of members on picket lines, and I've listened to thousands of views about what our union should be doing. All those interactions have informed what I think, and the platform that I'm running for re-election on. Thank you for those conversations. Thank you also to the patient and diligent team of people who helped proof-read various drafts of this document. A dyslexic is always reliant on a community of non-neurodivergent people to help them out.