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# UCU AND BREXIT

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In this USSBrief, NEC member Kirsten Forkert discusses the need for UCU to have a robust national policy on Brexit, examines the divisions within the Union and wider political culture, and suggests what can be done.

On 11 October 2019, UCU's National Executive Committee (NEC) voted to endorse motions on opposing a No-Deal Brexit and more generally PM Boris Johnson's Brexit plans. I am a member of UCU's NEC, and drafted and moved two of these motions, together with fellow NEC members Elane Heffernan and UCU Vice-President Vicky Blake. In this USSBrief, I will discuss the impasses around UCU's position on Brexit, which has limited the Union's capacity to respond effectively.

That Brexit will be a disaster for post-16 education is an understatement. According to recent [HESA](#) statistics, 31% of academic staff are international; 18% are European Union citizens and given the [large numbers](#) of EU citizens who have not registered for the settlement scheme, their right to stay in the country will be at risk. Even if their right to be in the country is not affected, UCU members may be affected in other ways, such as through losing access to EU funding and exchange schemes such as Erasmus and Horizon 2020, along with losing the right to free movement. If a Conservative government does a trade deal with Donald Trump, [indications](#) are that they will scrap employment rights, equality legislation, and environmental and consumer protections. The costs of Brexit to the public purse will lead to more austerity, on top of the 10 years of austerity we've lived through.

## UCU's (lack of) national policy on Brexit

Despite the urgency of this situation, UCU's response has been limited. The emails sent out by General Secretary Jo Grady and the actions described in [this statement](#) have demonstrated a willingness to be more proactive on the issue, and Grady has spoken publicly at [anti-prorogation and People's Vote events](#). However, the General Secretary's actions are constrained by the lack of a robust national policy on Brexit. UCU's national policy is based on motions passed at the [national Congress](#) submitted by branches, regions, and committees. To date, there have been comparatively few motions on Brexit, leaving the Union with limited scope to respond to fast-moving political events.

The Union's NEC can respond to events between Congresses, but like the General Secretary is constrained by the lack of a clear national policy on Brexit. This is not helped by divisions on the NEC. In [#USSbrief74](#), former NEC member Nick Hardy and I explained the role of factions, specifically the UCU Left and the Progressive Left (formerly Independent Broad Left). Both factions appear to be split around Brexit, with some in favour of Remain and others endorsing a Left Eurosceptic or 'Lexit' position: the latter is

the official position of the [Socialist Workers Party](#) (SWP) and the [Communist Party of Britain](#) (CPB), to which some faction members belong.

I will not critique Lexit in detail as [Marina Prentoulis](#) and [Anthony Barnett](#) have done so comprehensively. I should also acknowledge that there are valid criticisms of the EU, particularly of its imposition of austerity measures on Greece and increasingly [securitarian approach to the migration crisis](#) which has led to large-scale deaths at sea for over 20 years. It is also unfair for European citizens to be entitled to free movement while non-European citizens face increasingly steep hurdles to living and working in Europe. However, the problem with Lexit is that it ultimately does not take into consideration the current political realities of a Tory Brexit: at heart a racist, xenophobic, and ultimately right-wing libertarian project to deregulate.

If Lexit is one of the views represented on the NEC, and to some extent at Congress (where as a delegate, I have seen Eurosceptic motions proposed, although not carried), it is not a widely held view among UCU members. In a [survey](#) carried out with UCU members (to which almost 30,000 responded), 89% believed that there should be a referendum on the final deal. Lexit is also not a widely held view among those who voted Leave in 2016. Research in the [British Journal of Psychology](#) found anti-immigrant prejudice was a decisive factor in the referendum, and research from [The UK in a Changing Europe](#) highlighted the role of authoritarian or illiberal views driving the Leave vote.

If Lexit is a fringe viewpoint, why does it have any prominence within the UCU's structures? As I understand the situation, there are three main reasons. The first may be connected to the Left political parties mentioned above, raising questions about whether party principles or UCU member interests come first. The second reason may be related to dominant media narratives characterising Leave voters as working class, and Remain voters as middle class. These narratives are not supported by evidence; as geographer [Danny Dorling](#) has argued, large numbers of affluent voters in Southern England voted Leave, and the British Social Attitudes Survey highlighted [age](#) as a particularly significant factor. However, despite their lack of basis in reality, as [Andy Beckett](#) has argued, these narratives have continued to persist within the media and public debate. This raises the question of why, as a union of education workers, do we not apply our critical thinking skills to dominant media narratives? The third reason may reflect tensions around Brexit in relation to the Labour Party's leadership and Jeremy Corbyn's history of Euroscepticism. Although UCU is not affiliated to the Labour Party, Labour's importance to the wider trade union movement means it influences debates. Opposition to Brexit has been weaponised against Corbyn by both the right wing of the Labour Party and the media (which, as a [LSE study](#) of 8 major newspapers has demonstrated, is overwhelmingly hostile to Corbyn). One response can be a tribal siege mentality where discussing Brexit is immediately interpreted as a personal attack on Corbyn. Another response is the assumption that if we stop talking about Brexit and talk about other matters, people will get back to the 'real issues'. However, divisions around Brexit and migration cannot be ignored while they remain unresolved. The leadership's [decision](#), until [days ago](#), to not comply with the

recent Labour Party conference vote on defending and extending free movement combined with the unedifying spectacle of [Diane Abbott MP](#) — a long-time migrants' rights campaigner — calling for more border guards, are just the latest examples. [Issues](#) with the leadership of the People's Vote campaign have also not helped the situation.

## **Brexit motions at the 11 October NEC meeting**

I will now turn to the Brexit motions which were debated at the 11 October 2019 NEC meeting, to give a sense of how these debates played out. The [General Secretary](#) opened the discussion about Brexit, saying she'd received almost 200 emails raising concerns about the UCU's position on Brexit, and asking why the Union was not taking a stronger position on opposing Brexit, campaigning for migrants' rights, and backing a referendum on the final deal. Concerns were also raised by another NEC member through a member survey from their branch where many members are EU citizens, raising concerns about why the Union was not taking a stronger position on opposing Brexit.

Motion 1 was on setting up a committee to develop a Union position on referenda, with representation from the Equality Committees, Academic Related and Anti Casualisation Committees. It was passed overwhelmingly (6-7 against) but was amended to delete reference to the committees mentioned above and to make the NEC the committee the body that would have these discussions.

Motion 2, which I moved, was about publicising the People's Vote march on 19 October via email to members. This is where the divisions I have discussed revealed themselves. Concerns were raised about the lack of Congress policy to take a position on the motion, and it was argued that the People's Vote march does not have strong enough links to the trade union movement and the working class, and that we might in fact have more in common with Leave voters. The arguments made in favour of the motion were that circumstances are serious enough that it is important to act, and that supporting the march was a way of showing strong opposition to Boris Johnson and the Conservatives, as part of preparing for a General Election, and around the importance of showing solidarity with the many UCU members who could potentially be caught up in the hostile environment resulting from a Tory Brexit. The motion was carried, but with approximately 1/3 of delegates voting against.

Motion 3 (which I moved) on opposing a No Deal Brexit and further attempts to suspend Parliament was carried.

Motion 4 on campaigning for a General Election was passed (I think unanimously).

Motion 5 on freedom of movement and EU citizens' rights was passed (also I think unanimously).

Motion 6 on supporting international as well as EU staff and students was also passed (also I think unanimously).

## Conclusion

To conclude, this situation demonstrates that the lack of a robust national policy on Brexit constrains the Union's ability to act, and that the NEC in certain ways is failing to adequately represent UCU members' interests and views on Brexit. Firstly, this is in part because of the influence of Brexit-supporting political parties such as the SWP or the CPB within the Union's factions. As long as factionalism persists, this situation will continue. Secondly, because of the unresolved issues around migration, Brexit and the Labour leadership, there is a reluctance to discuss these matters within the trade union movement because of fears it could damage Corbyn's reputation. Finally, migrant members tend to be under-represented both on the NEC and in Congress delegations, although the development of the migrant [NEC seats](#) and Equality Standing Committee will hopefully begin to address this.

How can this situation be changed? First of all, it is important that branches and regions submit Congress motions on Brexit, so the UCU can have a stronger policy position. [The deadline for motions is 13 March 2020.](#) *Motions need to be passed by a quorate branch meeting so it is important that the meeting takes place before the deadline.* Second, it is important that UCU activists who reject factional politics or the dominance of political parties like SWP and CPB stand for NEC positions. You can find out more about the UCU's structures, including the NEC and how to stand for positions [here](#).

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