
UCU panel discussion contribution
Conference on the global education market
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Challenging the global market in education through international trade union solidarity

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I want to make the argument that global trade unionism and global alliances are neither a luxury optional extra nor something we can only turn to when our domestic issues are settled.

In doing so, I think there are two principles involved.

First, solidarity. The solidarity between two workforces with the same employer, or two workforces in the same sector, is not qualitatively different whether those workforces are in different counties or different countries.

That is especially the case when employers are trans-national corporations, or when there is a global labour market in play.

And secondly, as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) puts it, 'poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere'.

The international solidarity agreements made today by UCU with sister unions abroad are vital documents and a fantastic achievement.

In other industries, there are many agreements between Global Union Federations (such as Education International) and multi-national enterprises.

They are not quite the same as the international agreements UCU has signed, because those are union-to-union agreements, not collective bargaining.

But they are similar in this way.

Vital as they are, they need to be:

- (a) Implemented; and
- (b) Used by your members.

Global Union Federation agreements with multi-national enterprises are known as International Framework Agreements. They don't mandate terms and conditions, but they do allow for collective action, just as the UCU agreements do.

Experience of International Framework Agreements is that they are often not well enough known by trade union members in the companies where they apply, so you need to spread the word.

But as well as links with sister unions abroad, the same logic applies to links with other parts of the labour movement nationally and internationally.

The UCU, like several other sister unions, is part of their national trade union centre. But some sister unions are not, occasionally for political reasons, often for legal reasons.

But through Education International, they are all part of the global union family, able to intervene in international institutions such as the ILO, the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, UNESCO and in intergovernmental bodies like the European Union.

That ability to intervene doesn't mean we get what we want from those bodies – far from it – but it means we have a voice, and the scope to intervene in their decision-making.

And that is vital for three reasons:

- It gives us the chance to make international solidarity possible by challenging the bans and restrictions that apply in other countries;
- It gives us the chance to argue for changes to the conditions governing the international freedom of movement of capital and labour.
- And it gives us the chance to challenge the controls exercised by international institutions on the individual national governments we deal with – such as the IMF conditionality that so often provides loans only on the basis that public sector expenditure is cut, pensions reduced and terms and conditions undermined.

Progress in these areas is not easy to achieve, but working with colleagues in national trade union movements and in the global union family at least give us the chance to do more than protest outside, we can also negotiate inside.

Thanks for listening.

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