

## Speech to NPC Conference 05-08-06

Good Afternoon, I'm Gemma Tumelty, National President of the National Union of Students. Firstly can I thank you for once again inviting me here to speak to your conference, and let me congratulate the NPC officers for what looks like a very successful conference programme and for what I hope has been a productive three days for you.

It is an absolute privilege to be stood here representing the largest democratic student organisation in the world, a movement that encompasses over 5 million members in further and higher education – a **diverse** movement made up of individuals that are not just your stereotypical 18-21 year old students, but students who are, second chance learners, mature students, parents, carers and ultimately workers too.

And you, sat here in this room ultimately understand this diversity and the different needs that students of all types have, because it is you who are often sidelined or underrepresented, often by your own unions, but certainly in the past, by NUS. The issues you face are unique and often misunderstood, the debt you rack up,

disgraceful and the expectations of you in terms of teaching, confusing and sometimes exploitative.

Whilst teaching you often face a lack of support, are denied employment rights and are not supported in your personal development of teaching skills, I know you already have a good relationship with UCU but nationally this is going to be a historic year for NUS and Trade Unions— a year when for the first time we're formally engaging with the TU movement – not just when we need a favour, not just when yet again students' right to a free, accessible education is under threat- but a **serious, structured, long term commitment** to promote collectivist values, social solidarity and trade union membership amongst our membership. Our commitment is also born out of practicality, out of a very **real** understanding that the position students now find themselves in means that they are almost inevitably workers too, and they need the protection and solidarity of trade unions like never before, so I look forward to working with NPC and UCU in the future on this exciting agenda, to ensure that postgraduates are protected too.

This year NUS and the student movement has many challenges so I am going to talk to you about NUS' year ahead, outline a

challenging, ambitious and I hope forward thinking agenda that builds on the best of NUS, refocuses our organisation on campaigns, collectivism and student activism and provides a stable future for students, their unions and their national union.

I don't want a term of office spent navel gazing at structures again, we all know it needed doing- changing NUS internally had to happen for us to be where we are now, but I want to focus back out- on our members, on our education system, on our society and our world.

I want to lead a united student movement, a movement that is a force to be reckoned with when we mobilise, a movement that can represent ALL of its members effectively and a movement that wins.

I and I know my officers on the NEC want a fighting NUS. If we fight we may not always win, but if we don't fight we will surely lose.

That's why I'm pleased to announce that we will be having a first term national demonstration on October 29<sup>th</sup>, saying no to soaring

level of student debts, no to any attempts to lift the cap and no to marketisation of our education.

Because a fighting NUS means standing up, challenging power, and being seen to stand up for the interests of students, no matter whose cage gets rattled in the process. And it means not just doing it nationally, but empowering every officer, every activist and every student to do it too.

We live in a society where some students still live in poverty and appalling accommodation. We live in a world where student workers are denied key rights because they are viewed as temporary and dispensable. We live in an education environment where unscrupulous Vice Chancellors close down courses because it is quicker, cheaper and easier to close down than to tackle the policies of the Government through their own organisation. So fighting back is not a permanent call to arms, or a programme of endless unfocused demos and occupations. No, fighting back means never letting an injustice in education- or wider society- go by without challenging it,

But however good our message is it won't be heard unless we get it out there. That's why we're rebuilding a campaigning NUS. Students need a voice in the wider community and the wider world. NUS has a fine campaigning tradition. And it has been at its best when we have linked our members' educational concerns with wider social issues.

So we will be campaigning on the issues that matter - campaigning in Parliament, in Europe, in the council chambers, in the media and out there most importantly at the grassroots engaging our students. Because our membership is the greatest resource we have – and this year we are going to utilise them, with tens of thousands of student activists and their officer leaders mobilised behind the objectives their union and NUS sets itself.

Because NUS has always been at its best, it's most successful, its most influential when it unites around the things that matter.

Like Education

Student living conditions, finance or accommodation;

Student health

Access to volunteering and non formal learning

Discrimination in education

The lack of human rights and educational opportunity abroad

But I think that its fair to say that Education is the single biggest concern for our members, and quite rightly your biggest concern and one that we can unite around. You want a good education- that treats you like more than mere economic agents for wealth, allowing you to reach their potential and make your way in the world. That is why we, working together on common issues, have to continue to pressurise government until we secure access to education both undergraduate and postgraduate for all who can benefit from it.

But to pressure the Government with the full force of our membership and to win we really need to tackle the political apathy and sense of disconnection from the wider world that has come from a feeling of helplessness and frustration about the inability to

get our voices heard to Government on fundamental issues to our movement. Increasingly Students are becoming single issue politicians, there are big social movements and student activists out there that are abandoning students' unions and NUS as a place to go to change the world. So this year we're launching a student activist academy, learning from the trade union movement to develop our membership giving them the skills to organise, recruit and campaign on the issues that matter to them, locally, nationally and internationally.

Since my arrival in the student movement I have heard that NUS fails to deliver locally on local issues, that ends here and that ends now. The strategic plan, outlines our desire to put more resources on the frontline, to develop and support our student union members - so we are growing, we're taking on new staff out in regions to help build our organising and activist strategies. We're investing in new technology, helping officers and activists to network, to share experiences and to build better practice. And we're prioritising Further Education for development- ringfencing resources from NUS Extra and winning new money from Government to give real opportunities to the FE sector.

This year due to the sheer amount of text we passed at annual conference we have so much work to do and so many campaigns to win aside from some of the big ticket items I have outlined to you today –we have mandates to work on student activities, on sexual health and on free prescriptions for students, on anti racism work as the threat of the BNP grows larger, on privatisation of our accommodation and our canteens, on quality, on plagiarism and anonymous marking, on building and growing solidarity campaigns internationally, on equalities legislation, on anti war campaigns and on international students, and the list could go on and on. For our work to be truly effective and to be representative of all of the students we have in membership, I really hope you'll get involved at every level of our work and that this isn't the last time I see you.

It's fair to say that NUS has neglected post graduates in the past, but building on the work started last year, this year we are working on common issues together, from responding to the research assessment exercise consultation, working with you on the escalating costs of postgraduate study, campaigning on visa charges, highlighting the unfair demands of teaching on you and the conditions associated through producing a charter for

postgraduates that teach, campaigning with you on PGCE fees and ensuring that we meet regularly with NPC, communicating, sharing knowledge and resources – to ensure both of our organisations can unite to make things better for postgraduate students across the UK. Thank you for Listening