

Professor Eleanor Dickey became the UCU Rep for Classics in March. We asked her to tell us a bit about her experience and why she undertook the role:

### Becoming a UCU Rep

When it became clear last year that the university administration was going to impose new contracts on us all, force PAS through despite overwhelming opposition, and ignore a resounding vote of no confidence, I was as angry with the union as I was with the administration. Why, I asked myself, isn't the union for which I pay all those dues doing more to protect us? But the answer was so obvious as to be painful: a union is only as strong as its active membership, and people like me, who paid our dues and thought that entitled us to full protection, were being completely unrealistic given the tiny number of people at Reading who actually do things on behalf of the union.

So I figured that if I wanted a strong union to protect me, I'd better help the union be strong, and I volunteered to help out. The Reading UCU branch administrator, a lovely woman named Colette, recommended some training courses in how to be a rep, which sounded like a sensible idea because if you end up facing the administration across a table, with other people's futures in your hands, you would prefer to know what you are doing. In the end I did three training courses, Rep 1 and Rep 2 offered by the national UCU (each a 3-day class held in Oxford) and a day devoted specifically to casework (offered by the regional office and held at Reading). They were not, er, the best classes I've ever attended (to be honest I much prefer my own subject, which is why I went into it in the first place), but between them they did the job of equipping me to tackle the simpler end of union work, and along the way they enabled me to build up a network of union contacts at Reading and elsewhere.

Once I was trained Colette asked if I wanted to be an official rep; it would have been perfectly possible for me to say no, and no-one put me under any pressure (which was noble of them considering how short-staffed they are), but after some reflection I said yes. Now, therefore, my department has its own rep for the first time in as long as anyone can remember -- and in the first week I signed up five new members simply by sending around an e-mail pointing out the benefits of union membership in the present uncertain climate.

But the really satisfying thing about being a rep is the casework, in which I have been able to make a positive difference to the lives of individual Reading academics while also gaining skills and confidence in dealing with the administration. Some dreadful things go on here, leaving members distraught, anguished, and confused, unable to find out why disaster is striking them. This can happen to anyone: you don't have to have done anything wrong at all. Once, before coming to Reading, I was in that position myself, and I'll never forget what it feels like not only to be in a terrible mess but to have no idea how you got there. You are completely isolated, unable to trust your friends (after all one of them may be the reason you are in this mess) and unable to decide what to do (since you may not even know what the root of the problem actually is). But a rep does not have those handicaps: the rep is backed by a solid support network and has the emotional detachment and external standing to conduct an investigation and find out what has actually happened to the poor member and why -- and what to do about it. Such detective work is intellectually rewarding, like solving a problem in research, and at the same time emotionally rewarding, because you can make such a difference to the member. And once you've done this a few times for someone else you know how to do it, and you realize that if this kind of thing ever happens to you again, you'll be able to help yourself as well. Which makes one feel a lot safer!

One thing that worried me before becoming a rep was whether I would be compelled to take on cases that I did not want because they would take too much time, or because they were too difficult, or because the member was manifestly in the wrong. But in fact no-one has put me under any pressure to take on particular cases; I am free to select ones that fit my skills, interests, and schedule, and also free to sit in on some of the meetings the more experienced caseworkers have with members whose cases are beyond my skills, in order to learn how tackle more complex issues.

In other words, becoming a rep has given me new skills and opportunities, but no fixed obligations. This is a pretty amazing deal, and it is open to all RUCU members. We need more reps -- come give it a try, because you literally have nothing to lose and a lot to gain.

I would be more than happy to talk to anyone who wants to know more; I can be contacted at [E.Dickey@reading.ac.uk](mailto:E.Dickey@reading.ac.uk).