



# Catherine Arnold

Amidst rising political tensions within Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU), Catherine 'Cat' Arnold, the (former) education officer, has announced their shock resignation. A union member for almost their entire college life, Arnold's decision to quit with immediate effect was due to issues with a toxic workplace environment and alleged bullying. Why did Arnold feel that resignation was the only option and how does this reflect on a union that, under the far-left leadership of László Molnárfi, has become more controversial than ever?

As the 2023/24 academic year comes to a close, many TCDSU members will probably be breathing a rather large sigh of relief. Disagreements, tensions and arguments are all par for the course in student politics – eagerly watched on by future union members, nerdy student media journalists and unemployed alumni on X – but this year took the biscuit. From in-fighting over harassment accusations, presidential impeachment attempts and, most recently, Arnold's resignation, it has been a year to remember.

But what was the straw that broke the camel's back and caused Arnold, a seasoned union veteran and political campaigner, to disappear just weeks before exam season?

If someone were to write a novel about Trinity (because God knows we don't have enough of those floating around lately), Arnold's character could easily, but perhaps incorrectly, be described as polarising. Like so many student politicians that have come before, Cat was affiliated with the youth wing of a major Irish political party, if Labour can still be called a 'major' party these days.

As the gender equality officer for Labour Youth and having worked closely with Labour LGBT, Arnold ticked all the right boxes for the left-leaning politicians on campus who voted Cat4Education in the 2022/23 elections (which had a record low turnout of 9% of the student body, with most of these voters likely identifying as the aforementioned left-leaning politicians).

In an apparent contrast, Arnold also worked as a research assistant for the Young Women's Christian Association. Not to paint all young people who are religious with a broad stroke but, on a college campus, their views can sometimes be co-opted by those with more right-wing tendencies, as happened during the Repeal the 8th Referendum.

Arnold was also involved in TCDSU from very early on in their college career – a green flag for union hacks and the left, but a red flag for those on campus whose votes only go to those outside the left-leaning 'establishment'.

Yet despite these potentially contrasting elements of Cat's *curriculum vitae*, Arnold was elected to the position of education officer with more than 81% of the vote. The main reason for this – and the main reason that their politics were not open to much scrutiny during the election campaign – is the fact that they were running unopposed. Perhaps if there was somebody running against Arnold, the contest would have opened the platform to more debate.

As it was, the few students who voted in

the 2022/23 elections voted for the only name on the ballot, Catherine 'Cat' Arnold.

It didn't take long for the job to get bumpy. October saw the first major schism between TCDSU president László Molnárfi and Arnold. After accusations of harassment by members of the Trinity Postgraduate Worker's Organisation (PWO TCD), Arnold, along with three other sabbatical officers and the vast majority of the part-time officers, brought forward a motion to withdraw the constitutionally mandated support that TCDSU must give to postgraduate unions.



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Arnold gave a measured speech with the word 'alleged' liberally sprinkled throughout, so its toxic meaning was effectively neutered. There is a world of difference between 'allegedly harassed' and 'harassed' in the world of politics – and sometimes also in libel law.

Molnárfi, ever one for the dramatics and use of his thesaurus, successfully one-upped Arnold in this regard. To him and his, the claims were "unproven", "unsubstantiated" and the whole shebang was "in bad faith". But as usual, Molnárfi didn't stop there.

Even his staunchest opponents cannot deny that Molnárfi has a gift for great soundbites and he claimed that "this motion, if passed, will reverberate throughout the entire country".

In what would, unfortunately for Arnold, be only the first in a series of defeats this year, the motion failed to pass.

Losses for Arnold did not automatically

mean victories for Molnárfi, however. His enduring legacy as TCDSU president will likely be the blockading of the Book of Kells exhibit in a stunt – which was in protest over the student accommodation crisis – that reportedly lost Trinity College over €25,000.

A close second on the list of 'things László will be remembered for' is bringing the question of the politicisation of TCDSU to the fore and almost getting impeached over it.

After being accused of multiple constitutional breaches for his political campaigning, Molnárfi last month faced a vote on whether he was to be censured (one step down from impeachment). In what, in hindsight, really should have been expected, Molnárfi's many supporters simply walked out before the vote could be held, thus ensuring the union council could not reach quorum.

The students' union is now well and truly split down the middle, with the more left-leaning Molnárfi supporters versus his more centrist and centre-right opponents, a minority of whom believe him to be some sort of conniving supervillain.

Arnold does not fall into that last category but that does not mean the two ended their working relationship on friendly terms.

Arnold described their time as education officer as "a fraught year with consistent issues of a toxic workplace environment and workplace bullying".

Molnárfi, on behalf of the union, strongly denied any such bullying and instead asked people to focus on all the good work his union has done this year. And 'toxic' can mean many different things to many different people. A union divided in half with political turmoil at almost every turn – that can be toxic.

It shouldn't be forgotten, however, that Arnold has also endured allegations relating to disorganisation and accountability throughout their tenure. Projects passed on to others, delays in responses, poor communication – that too can be toxic (allegedly, of course).

Arnold has remained tight-lipped about the juicier details of their decision to resign, disappointing those who treat student union politics like the world's longest and most insufferable soap opera. But what is clear is that Arnold is leaving the union in a more chaotic place than this time last year.

Yet perhaps there is also some bravery in the decision to just up sticks and leave before your time is up, knowing when to go – or perhaps we've all been reading too many think pieces on Leo Varadkar lately.