

UNISON Local Government Conference Day 2 - Monday 15 June 2015

Facility Time & Recruitment

Monday morning featured discussions on the union's organising & schools. We heard that we had recruited 80,000 new members in 2014, but saw 95,000 leavers as austerity continued to decimate services. Approx 500,000 jobs have gone since 2010.

There was much debate on the threats to the union's ability to organise. For many branches the most pressing issue is the attack on facility time. The new government wants to attack us & this is one of the weapons they are trying to use, while some employers are jumping on the bandwagon in the knowledge that if they can restrict facility time they can hinder our ability to assist members. In London one branch secretary has been refused facility time & even annual leave so he can't attend conference & so preventing his voice being heard.

The motion on facility time referred to "these attacks are part of a political attack on trade unions in local government". The reality is this is political although austerity is used as an excuse. Fortunately many employers still see the value of facility time & studies have shown its value to the economy as a whole.

By agreeing the motion conference committed UNISON to give full backing to branches taking lawful industrial action to defend facility time.

Roger Bannister of Knowsley Branch pointed out that the loss of facility time would put a major strain on our activists and also on members who would be worried that they wouldn't have a rep available to help them when needed.

Conference heard that the current UK attitude to facility time is a long way behind Germany, for example, where unions are entitled to one full time release for every 200 employees. We have only a fraction of that.

The issue of facility time ties in with another key subject discussed on Monday ie the recruitment and retention of activists. A motion put forward by the Eastern Region recognised the importance of "recruiting new activists & ensuring the activists we have receive the support, training & encouragement they need."

Schools

UNISON has 230,000 members working in schools, approximately 20% of our membership. These have seen massive changes in recent years especially with the move to academies. This process is continuing apace despite the lack of evidence that they raise standards.

School budgets are a complex area & UNISON needs to have specialist organisers working in this area. This has been trialled in the Northern Region. School staff are facing pressures as budgets are being cut with changes to terms & conditions. There has also been a tendency in some areas to delete Higher Level Teaching Assistant posts to save money.

We need more reps in schools &, as a delegate from Bristol suggested, closer working with teaching unions such as the NUT to co-ordinate campaigns.

Pay & Conditions

The debates on Monday afternoon focused on the important issues of pay and conditions. Several motions discussed pay. Motion 22 called for a £10 Living Wage (currently £7.85/hr). We will no doubt hear the usual arguments that it will cost jobs but is it wrong to want to reduce the number of

people on benefits or relying on foodbanks? Also increasing the Living Wage would help increase tax revenue & boost high street spending.

Conference moved on to discuss the crucial issue of the next local government pay campaign. It was decided that a range of measures were needed. As was said by one delegate "local government workers have never had it so tough." We need a clear vision & a high profile media & publicity campaign. In the words of a delegate from Sheffield we need to be "sophisticated, smart & strong".

Inevitably, in what was a lively debate, some delegates felt that the campaign needed a much earlier move to decisive industrial action. However, the motion as passed ensured that various options will be pursued to achieve our objective of fair pay for our members.

Conference also discussed our national terms & conditions - the "Green Book". UNISON remains committed to national bargaining. It deplored "the Local Government Association's continuing policy to negotiate on pay only & devolve negotiations over conditions to council level." As our national LGBT committee pointed out, our collective agreements have helped secure equality rights.

As a union we remain opposed to any move to regional or local pay bargaining.

UNISON National Delegate Conference Day 1 - Tuesday 16 June 2015

Tuesday - we have now been joined by the representatives of the rest of the union & become the National Delegate Conference. We're in Glasgow's SECC. Next door in the Hydro for the next two nights are Fleetwood Mac. I did wonder if any of their hits could be appropriate for a union conference - "Don't Stop", "Go Your Own Way" or perhaps "Rumours"?

The keynote speaker on Tuesday was our General Secretary, Dave Prentis. He started by commenting on the General Election result, noting that Mr Cameron was elected with 34% of the vote whilst hypocritically saying that anyone who doesn't vote in a union ballot should be considered to have voted "no". Like me, he turned to song titles, in his case paraphrasing Lesley Gore in talking about Labour "it's our party & we'll cry if we want to".

Our General Secretary spoke of various disciplinary cases against UNISON reps across the country. He had a clear message for employers "If you come for our activists we will take you on".

Mr Prentis praised the achievements of our LGBT members & their great achievements in recent years, but recognised that there was still more to be done. Our other successes include the fact that council after council is now signing up to UNISON's Ethical Care Charter.

He applauded the Glasgow Homelessness Unit workers, on strike for 12 weeks now & all other disputes going on around the country. He made clear that the union fully supports these actions & will continue to do so. He set out our aspirations: proper jobs, fair pay & no zero hours contracts.

UNISON is under attack now - our jobs, services, funding & even our right to exist, but we're fighting back. The union is trebling the number of Fighting Fund organisers to help branches.

As he said "We will resist".

In debates today Conference discussed, among other things, Care For the Elderly, Young Members & Funding of Public Services.

A representative of our 106,000 Retired Members told Conference that they stand shoulder to shoulder with our working members. He reiterated the need for an integrated approach to health & social care. He felt that there was a lack of detail in the government's vision for this area. Ours though is to rebuild the public sector. Conference heard that we need to improve the quality of care. Fifteen minute visits are simply not good enough. Unpaid carers save the taxpayer millions, but allowances are inadequate. Care should be free at the point of need.

In UNISON a "Young Member" is classed as under 27. It's worrying that of the approx 3,000 delegates at Conference only 83 are young members. We need to work hard to recruit among our younger colleagues, not just to get them to join the union but to become activists too. As was said repeatedly "they are our future."

Conference is not just about debates & speeches in the hall. Every lunchtime & evening there are fringe meetings on a range of subjects. Last night I attended a meeting on the daunting subject of pension governance. This is an area where change is taking place. New pension boards are being formed to oversee the many funds across the country. These boards will have scheme members (including union reps) as well as council representatives.

A major concern for us is the new cost sharing provision which will come in next year. This is designed to cushion our employers from increases in scheme costs by capping their contributions. If funds come under pressure the shortfall will be made up from increased member contributions or cuts to scheme benefits.

The new boards will need to ensure that pension funds are being managed well & not being drained by excessive charges. We cannot afford to be subsidising big City finance firms.