

UNISON Local Government Conference Day 1 - Sunday 14 June 2015

On Sunday morning delegates were welcomed to the Local Government conference by Dave Prentis who told us we were in "the eye of the storm". Our General Secretary thanked activists for the work we do. He talked of the daily reality of austerity cuts. We need to adapt to respond where we're needed most, at local level. He gave the example of Barnet where the branch is fighting wholesale privatisation. Glasgow has had 70 members on strike since 31 March. Mr Prentis pointed out that we now have the "most rightwing government I've dealt with in 40 years".

This theme was picked up by Glen Williams chair of the Service Group Executive who helpfully told us "we will be getting hammered ", although not in the nearby Glasgow hostels. He pointed to the £30bn tax avoidance contributing to cuts saying "it's not a recession it's a robbery "

Mr Williams recognised the difficulties faced by branches. He said that steward & branch officers are wilting. We need more trained activists.

The session moved on to debate the future of local government. Paul Gilroy from Newcastle branch referred to local government as the invisible emergency service. Our members respond to crises in many areas from safeguarding to clearing up after flooding. These essential services need protecting & as a union we must argue against the flawed commissioning model. Furthermore we must guard against the idea that Combined Authorities are the answer to all our problems. He pointed out the seven authorities making up the North East combined authority couldn't even agree a budget.

Jon Rogers of Lambeth picked up the commissioning theme. He started by telling Conference that they had just had a reorganisation but like all council reorganisations "don't worry if you don't like it there'll be another one along shortly". In Lambeth they no longer have departments, but "clusters". They have a commissioning cluster which "commissions services from the delivery cluster which delivers the services which the commissioning cluster wants to be delivered!"

Sunday afternoon continued the theme of outsourcing & privatisation & was opened by a powerful speech from John Hilary of War on Want. Mr Hilary emphasised the importance of War on Want's shared vision with UNISON of social justice. He highlighted the importance of next Saturday's march in London against austerity. As a country we shouldn't be scapegoating the most vulnerable in our society. A key element in this campaign is the need for a mandatory Living Wage. Shockingly there are now 5.2m people in our country working for less than the Living Wage. A living wage should be a right, not just in the UK but for those working abroad supplying goods to high street shops.

John Hilary warned us of the danger of the Transatlantic Trade & Investment Partnership (TTIP). This is an agreement which is being negotiated between the EU and USA. If implemented this agreement would give massive powers to big business, reducing the ability of governments to regulate. For example, TTIP would prevent the inspection of imported meat. It would also prevent councils from including social provisions in their contracts.

TTIP & Privatisation was the major topic for the afternoon's debates. Conference was told that we need to lobby MPs & MEPs to oppose TTIP. Conference also agreed a motion on Privatisation & Outsourcing. Included in that motion was a request for UNISON's Regions to "call upon Labour-run authorities in the strongest possible terms to drop a commissioning-led approach in favour of directly providing local services".