

Report of Unison conference, Glasgow, July 2015

Unison's annual national delegate conference (NDC) took place for 4 days in Glasgow just weeks after the election of a Tory government. Prior to the NDC the union's local government conference met for two days. There were around 1000 at the local government conference and around 2500 at the conference for the whole union.

Conference is extremely important for the union – it is the 'parliament' of the union where issues are discussed and policies voted on.

Delegate after delegate talked about the attacks on ordinary people – from increases in the number of people using foodbanks to wholesale privatisation of public services.

There were also horror stories from places like Bromley, where the council has unilaterally ended 'facility time' meaning that union reps get no time off to represent members and have to take annual leave to carry out union duties.

Throughout the conference it was clear what is needed – a nationally organised and co-ordinated campaign of industrial action. We've lobbied, given politicians the facts and information, tried to negotiate but the bottom line is that they have ignored us. Delegates expressed further disappointment over the calling off of the pay dispute last year. Sadly the current leadership of the union does not have a strategy that can win. The general secretary Dave Prentis pledged the union's full support to branches taking action, but we need more. We can't have individual branches fighting alone – we need the full strength of the union brought together in a campaign of action – linked up with other unions we could halt the tide of austerity

There was some debate about the result of the elections and how Labour lost. It was apt that it took place in Scotland where the SNP swept the board based on anti-austerity rhetoric, and where Labour are seen as the 'Red Tories'. It is worth mentioning that despite the anti-austerity noises coming from the SNP they have been implementing cuts in Scotland just like the Tories and Labour. Unfortunately and quite bizarrely due to union rules it is very difficult for discussion to be had about the political direction of the union at conference – this will become even more important as in England and Wales less than a third of members pay in to the 'Labour Link / Affiliated Political Fund' from their subs, and in Scotland it is only 10 per cent!

With such a big conference it is very hard to get in to speak on the discussions but I managed to get in 3 times as follows on the discussions and made the points briefly outlined below (you get just 3 minutes to speak). It was a very daunting but exciting experience.

Devolution / combined authorities – Combined Authorities very much part of Tories public sector reform agenda, reducing jobs. Unison should support the call for a referendum and should not support CAs unless there are guarantees re jobs and services and also genuine democratic bodies to run them (i.e not Mayors like Digby Jones)

Palestine – Need solidarity with the Palestinians, as Unison did last Summer during Operation Protective Edge where 2000 people in Gaza were killed. Also need to show support to those within Israel who are campaigning against the occupation, and to support Israeli trade unions fighting back against their employers. Ultimately Western governments and the corrupt Arab regimes do not have

the interests of Palestinians at heart and will not act in their interests – therefore falls to ordinary people around world to support. Should take optimism from demonstration of working class Jews in Tel Aviv, Israel last Summer who used the slogan 'Arabs and Jews refuse to be enemies'. Unity of ordinary people in Middle East is only way forward to build a movement to end the siege of Gaza, the occupation of the West Bank and against the divisive policies of Western powers and the corrupt oppressive regimes of the region. (Since the conference the branch has donated £50 to a TUC appeal to help rebuild Gaza's agriculture)

Debate on living wage, £10 per hour – We should look to the United States where Fast Food workers are fighting for \$15 per hour. Unison should join with growing number of other unions to campaign for a £10 per hour minimum wage. If Labour do not support this and adopt it as a policy then we as a union that gives millions to them need to be able to have a serious and open debate about where we put our political support. Victories on issues such as pay can breed confidence amongst members,

During conference two massive issues were being fought over by Unison members in Glasgow. Firstly, Glasgow homelessness caseworkers have been on indefinite all out strike for 13 weeks against pay cuts and workloads. Secondly the SECC (venue where the conference was held) had just sacked a Unison health and safety rep and were refusing to recognise trade unions. Protests were held over both of these events during the conference, and it was brilliant and inspiring to see Glasgow Unison which one of the biggest and best organised branches in the country taking action to defend their members. The challenge will be to get the whole union acting in this fashion.

I think there was a sense of anger felt at the conference towards the leadership, that hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost in the public sector and that nationally none of the unions have taken any sort of serious action. There was very little debate (people speaking against motions) as the vast majority of stuff was not contentious.

Conference was very tiring, inspiring and frustrating all at the same time! There are big challenges ahead for Unison, and we will need a much firmer industrial and political strategy if we are to meet these challenges.

Paul Hunt

Steward in Revs and Bens