

UK's public service workers speak out

City UNISON's report on Local Government and National UNISON Conference, by Branch Delegate Tim Harvey

Some 3,000 delegates and visitors gathered at UNISON's 2008 National Conference in Bournemouth 17 –20 June, to set the union's agenda for the next year.

Preceding it, the Local Government Conference, which ran from 15 to 16 June was addressed at the start of its conference by its out-going Chair of the Service Group Executive, Jean Geldart, who was retiring after being active in UNISON for 39 years.

She pointed out that the issues facing the union had been the same over the years: pay, privatisation and cuts. Unfortunately, the political establishment of all parties now believe in a privatisation agenda. UNISON had, over the years opposed cuts and had won a key battle, with support of local politicians and communities, through the organisation of the union. In spite of Thatcher, Major, Blair and Brown, unions had succeeded in keeping many local services public.

This year the government had decided to keep local government pay down, offering 2.45% nationally, which is below inflation. The real reason they wanted to do this was not inflationary pressures but to keep local government cost down, making workers pay for services. She hoped members would not accept this in the ballot due on 23rd June. (In fact they didn't!)

We could only be treated properly and fairly though organisation. The private sector making profit out of public services was unacceptable.

Ending on a positive note, Ms Geldart said; "We are up against hard times as we have been so many times before, but we have always succeeded. And if we work hard and work together, if we keep campaigning, we will defeat the government's marketisation and pay polices; we will continue to succeed".

ANNUAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE

The Annual Delegate Conference is the union's supreme policy making body, a parliament of the union where every member is represented by his or her elected delegates.

There were plenty of issues debated by delegates which will keep the union busy organising to meet the challenges of the year ahead: the future of our public services, including the move to shared services; pension provision and governance; protecting and organising migrant workers; marking the 60th anniversary of the NHS; the 10th birthday of the national minimum wage and citizenship issues such as affordable housing and fuel poverty.

General Secretary of UNISON David Prentis issues stark warning to Gordon Brown that he must listen and act or "our people will bring you down"

In his address to the UNISON annual conference Mr Prentis offered the government a blunt warning, admitting that the outlook does not look good for Labour.



He cited the optimism of last year, when we applauded the retirement of Tony Blair, shattered, as the Labour vote goes into free fall. And, he added, when we finally make progress in securing minimum protections for hundreds of thousands of agency workers, we are told by John Hutton that there's to be a moratorium on employment rights.

"The same old Tory drivel resurrected by a Labour minister - it's a moratorium we don't accept, the same old lie that has been used against every single measure this movement has won for working people since the 19th century." Mr Prentis pointed out that, if there is to be a moratorium, it should be on Mr Hutton's ministerial career, as the government churns out the "same broken record," inviting the private sector into the heart of the NHS.

"Siphoning off taxpayers' money is something even Margaret Thatcher wouldn't dare to back, so is it any wonder that our members are asking whose side this government really on?" he asked.

Simply driving on with a political agenda opposed by Labour supporters, trade unionists and public service workers would not keep the Tories out.

"What is so wrong with the government moving away from the rip-off of the private finance initiative, giving British workers the same rights as the rest of Europe or Labour, making itself out again as the party of social justice?"

And a clearly angry Mr Prentis told Mr Brown " It's time to listen, time to act. Raise our people up or our people will bring you down.

"2010 is just round the corner. We want a government which stands up for the working people of our union, people accountable to our agenda."

Mr Prentis also warned the government that, if it is serious about tackling inflation, it needs to tackle corporate greed.

"It is a disgrace when tens of thousands of public-sector workers can't afford homes in the communities they serve," he said.

UNISON upset with Boris Johnson

(20/06/08) Angry delegates today agreed to withdraw UNISON's financial support from the GLA-organised RISE festival, in protest at Boris Johnson's decision to drop the festival's anti-racist message.

Regardless of this, the London mayor has declared that the festival would no longer have an anti-racist political purpose, and was instead "a celebration of music and culture."

The BNP's newly-elected GLA member Richard Barnbrook has congratulated Mr Johnson on the move.

Annette Mansell-Green of the UNISON NEC told conference that the festival, which was supported in its original purpose by former mayor Ken Livingstone, "has become an important response to the rise of the right, especially the BNP.

"The whole point of the festival is to support an anti-racist message and bring together thousands of people in the fight to keep the BNP out of London. This is political censorship, and UNISON will not stand for it."

Ms Mansell-Green, joint chair of UNISON's General Political Fund, which pays for the union's anti-racism campaigning, added: "No GPF money will go to RISE this year or any other year as long as it's not an anti-racist festival". Gloria Hanson of Greater London Region, which has also decided to withhold financial support of the festival, called Mr Johnson "a disgrace", and his decision "an insult to London, an insult to trade unions and, most importantly, an insult to the memory of Stephen Lawrence."