

National Black Members Group annual conference February 2012



UNISON National Black Members Conference 3-5 February 2012 at Brighton

This report provides a snapshot of some of the highlights of UNISON National Black Members Conference at Brighton which was attended by Tahira Khan, Sandra Bennett, Paul Ahmed and Taiwo Awoyungbo.

It was a particularly poignant affair this year as **Mr. Neville Lawrence** attended and gave an emotional address to conference on the last day. Just days before conference (on 1 February 2012) the attorney general had declined to refer sentences handed to Gary Dobson and David Norris to the court of appeal when he ruled that Stephen Lawrence killers' jail terms were not unduly lenient. It is clear that the murder of a young black man (Stephen Lawrence) 18 years ago and the inquiry that followed exposed the reality of institutional racism, helped shift public attitudes on race and transformed individual lives in the UK.

As last year, attendance was reduced, and this may be visible evidence of the consequences of government cutbacks, but conference was in no mood to retreat or surrender despite how things are at present. Resistance has been about showing that there is an alternative to the cuts. As **UNISON general secretary Dave Prentis** said when addressing conference we continue "taking on political elite that thinks it knows best". He placed emphasis on how "equality is the beating heart of our union ... and we will fight racism wherever it shows its ugly head" and he had special praise for Doreen and Neville Lawrence, saying that their campaign for justice had "changed our country - and for that, our union applauds them."

Dave Prentis explained how the government has withdrawn its penalising proposals as a result to the day of action on 30 November 2011, bearing in mind that up to that point it was not prepared to move an inch, and also how none of our members are losing out because of the strike. He also relayed some startling facts about the widening gap between the haves and have-nots. Fact: - over the last year:

- 50 colleges have been closed
- 100 police stations have been closed
- 250 Surestart centres have been closed,
- 450 libraries have been closed, and while
- the top 100,000 wealthiest people have increased their wealth by 35%,

- 70% of our members have reduced the amount of food they eat, and
 - 35% of our members have cut back by not going to the dentist.
- These are all consequences of the government cut backs and reasons UNISON continues to fight the cuts.

Also addressing the conference on the opening afternoon was **UNISON president Eleanor Smith**, who was concerned to stress the importance of the pensions fight to Black members, who are much more likely to find themselves in poverty in retirement than their white counterparts. Talking of how she had become a steward to fight against racism in the regrading of nurses, Ms Smith described the day of action on 30 November 2011 as having "struck a blow" against racism. She too spoke of how 1992 stood out because of Stephen Lawrence's death, but she emphasised what can be achieved when people stick together saying that "we can never sit back, we can never be complacent".



Tahira, Sandra & Taiwo

Local Government Service group

Conference learnt how:

- social care is bearing the brunt of the cuts, particularly Adult social care – not just jobs but how they services are being delivered e.g. by care packages are only being given in extreme need.
- Women are being disproportionately affected as 75% of those affected are women and 45% are part-time women.
- Local Government Pension Scheme – is still being negotiated and discussed, including: (i) outsourced staff can still be in the LGPS (ii) no increase in contributions (iii) still a 'defined' pension scheme (iv) retirement age still 65.

Regional Meeting – Greater London

Margaret Greer chaired this meeting and **Maggie Logan** (Secretary to Regional Black members committee) explained how a FOI request made to the Labour Research Organisation had received a response just the week before. A full analysis was being done but had preliminarily shown that the cuts are disproportionately affecting Black members (particularly women). Taiwo Awoyungbo spoke during the meeting.

Fringe meeting – Show Racism the Red Card

Paul Mortimer (ex-professional footballer), **Sarah Soyeyi**, and **Bob Abole** (UNISON Assistant General Secretary) facilitated this meeting and explained how:

- Campaign began in 1996. They go into schools and help educate teachers and pupils e.g. by running national schools competitions etc.
- Research published in July 2011 showed how racism remains within the education system with 83% of respondents having witnessed racist attitudes or behaviour.
- How they can help – Workshops in the classroom, Adults' work through raising awareness of the realities, impact and damage of racism; union branches can affiliate; they are linking up with 'Kick it Out' campaign to organise a joint conference

Workshop – Developing Black Activists

Roger McKenzie (UNISON Assistant General Secretary) facilitated and said:

- “Riots are the language of the unheard” - Martin Luther King
- A key obstacle to self-organisation can be white activists who do not understand or do not take it seriously.
- Tahira Khan who attended this workshop suggested that a key part of being active within an organisation is to have strong links with external community groups that are able to support individuals who may otherwise be isolated and victimised by their employers.
- Roger believes that self-organisation needs to lead the way in fighting racism and the current situation provides a golden opportunity to stand up for progressive politics.

Workshop – DNA Database, the fight for justice

Matilda MacAttram (Director of Black Mental Health UK) facilitated this workshop and explained how:

- Social analysis from a black perspective of the DNA database shows how deaths in custody of people sectioned under mental health legislation are about 20% black people. The power by police to collect DNA samples at arrest entails the data being kept for all people arrested, including those found to be innocent. Those with their DNA on the National DNA Database are, as a percentage:
 - 6 whites
 - 27 Afro/Caribbean
 - 42 black men (2008)
 - 77 being young black men
 - 10 of all children
 - 23 of all black children



Taiwo, Sandra & Paul

- It is almost impossible for individuals to have their DNA information taken off the police files once it is input. When removed from police files it is only the barcode

with the information that is removed, but the samples are still kept and often sold to private companies. NDNAD is a serious threat to community relations e.g. when, due to a lack of space, a person is put in a police cell instead of being admitted to hospital on mental health grounds they end up being treated and processed in the same way as a person being held while under suspicion of having committed a crime. This wrongly criminalises a large number of innocent individuals.

Paul Ahmed attended this workshop and he spoke during the meeting.

Workshop – Tackling child slavery & trafficking

Klara Skrivankova (Anti-Slavery International) facilitated this workshop and explained how:

- there are more slaves now, globally, than in ancient and historical times
- slavery although legally abolished in most countries was never eradicated. It simply mutated into new forms of modern slavery. Antislavery International estimates that in 2011 about 6000 people in the U.K. were here as ‘slaves’
- trafficking in human beings involves bringing people into a state of exploitation e.g. bonded labour, forced provision of sexual services, domestic servitude etc
- children are particularly vulnerable to modern slavery as they are easier to manipulate and control than an adult who may exercise his/her free will. Also poverty and deprivation can engender circumstances where children are vulnerable to exploitation e.g. a parent giving their child to a foreigner or rich relative who has promised to arrange to educate the child and act as his/her guardian because the parent cannot afford to send the child to school
- when child slaves reach the age of majority the UK government many times deports them to their country of origin rather than treat them as vulnerable adults
- with the 2012 Olympics bringing a high demand for short term labour it is anticipated by those in the field that this type of criminal activity will increase

Safeguarding children should be a priority of for all people not just government and government agencies and ASI continues to lobby government about this.

Overall conference was well worth the trip to Brighton and the guest speaker from Public Services International – **Ms Chidi King** (Equality and Rights Officer) was particularly good.

We look forward with optimism to conference next year.

Paul Ahmed
Sandra Bennett
Tahira Khan
Taiwo Awoyungbo

