



UNISON National Black Members Conference 18-20 January 2013

UNISON National Black Members Conference was held this year, at Sheffield City Hall, Sheffield. Sheffield, one of seven cities in the York and Humberside region, is the home of London 2012 Olympic Games gold medal winning heptathlon – Jessica Innis and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. Conference was attended by Sandra Bennett, Paul Ahmed, Sylvia Adjei, Sajid Patel and Taiwo Awoyungbo.



Waltham Forest Unison Delegation

Sadly, as last year, attendance was reduced (visible proof of the consequences of government cuts). Nevertheless, Conference was in no mood to be downhearted as evidenced by some of the lively motions (e.g. Motion 9: Housing Benefit, Welfare Reform and Motion 18: Black men and prostate cancer). As usual UNISON General Secretary **Dave Prentis** rallied the troops with a rousing address which amongst many topical issues touched on “tax cuts for the super-rich and food banks for the working poor”. He ended by explaining how “a reason that people do not join a union is because they are never asked; and a reason why members who join do not get active is because they are never asked.” He tasked all activists to talk with people about joining a union and make conditions such that people are encouraged to become active.

Keeping with this theme **Neema Williams**, a young member and first-time speaker, in stressing how remarkable the annual conference is - "the largest in Europe; a major achievement by UNISON" – went on to urge members to make it even more welcoming for young members. Neema spoke of how she is encouraged to join the

Union and be active; however at conference young people cannot take part in the voting process. She asked the conference to Move Motion 6 which would enable young people to vote. "If our young Black people are not interested," she said, "then the fault is our own. All branches must be looking to develop the next generation of activists." This was echoed by **Manjula Kumari** (National Black Members Committee), when she said: "Let's go back and let's recruit young members".

UNISON president **Chris Tansley** also raised the importance of recruiting when he addressed conference and when he said: "Now is the time to recognise all potential and be involved in the recruitment drive that will begin in March". He added that there would be a campaign to get people voting.

Local Government (LG) Service group meeting

This was facilitated by **Heather Wakefield** and proved a contentious session! The background was that UNISON had produced a DVD to highlight the following how:

- Local government workers have been singled out by the coalition for the severest of the current cuts with 250,000 LG jobs have being cut
- Black workers in LG have been disproportionately affected by these cuts
- Inflation is at 2.5% and has been as high as 5%,
- Therefore LG workers should get a pay increase

The video was made up of interviews with LG workers giving their personal account of the effects the cuts have had on their and their families' lives. Unfortunately all the interviewees on the DVD are exclusively white workers and as this does not represent the actual LG workforce it was not a tenable position for UNISON to put itself in -- especially when UNISON's aim was to emphasise the adverse consequences and disproportionate impact of the cuts on its Black members. Members were unhappy with the DVD and asked for its withdrawal from circulation.

Regional Meeting – Greater London

Margaret Greer (Chair, regional Black members committee) facilitated this meeting. She touched on Conference attendance pointing out that there were only 93 Delegates and 50 Visitors from London this year. Topics discussed included the standing orders committee report; regional reports on the three working parties for (a.) 2013's Black history month event, (b.) recruitment and organising, and (c.) motions. She also chaired the discussion on which motions should be reprioritised for national delegate conference by the Greater London region. After conference Margret informed attendees that motion 26 with amendment 1 - withdrawal of DVD had resulted in the DVD being withdrawn from circulation following national Black members' conference decision.

Fringe meeting – Mental health -- "It affects us all"

This was attended by Taiwo and Sandra. Ashton Wynter (Sheffield African Caribbean Mental Health Association), facilitated a discussion which ranged over topics including the overrepresentation of black people in mental health and prison institutions, the effects of culture and "the language of pain", the consequences of black people's migration, the role of religion or faith, the role of gender, the stigma of mental illness and its consequent nature of being 'a hidden disability.'

Fringe meeting – Show racism the red card (SRTRC) and Kick it out (KIO)



This was attended by Sajid. Olivier Bernard ex-Newcastle United footballer and Howard Gayle ex-Liverpool player, along with representatives from SRTRC and KIO discussed with delegates how the campaigns have promoted the eradication of racist behaviour towards black players at various venues from the grassroots level to professional football games. Sajid made contributions to both SRTRC and KIO.

Fringe meeting – Mobilising Black votes

This was attended by Paul. The discussion was to be led by Nick Lowles (Hope Not Hate -- an organisation set up in 2004 to mobilise opposition to the politics of hate peddled by the British National party and English defence league) but in his absence the meeting addressed issues surrounding the black vote for local and national elections. The meeting talked about low turnouts and the consequences of political apathy amongst the general electorate, and how mobilising the black vote will combat racism which while ever present in society increases in times of hardship. We should all ensure that we vote and encourage family and friends to vote too. Paul mentioned the recent broad coalition of various groups who came together in opposition to the EDL march through Walthamstow.

Workshop – Job losses and cuts

Sandra and Sylvia attended this workshop facilitated by **Greg Thomson**, UNISON Head of Strategic Organisers. Greg gave a talk on how job losses through the cuts had affected membership numbers. The talk was followed by a lively workshop which brought people together to discuss what activists could do to increase membership. Suggestions included appealing better to young people, advertising all the benefits of Union membership and being more proactive in recruiting.

Workshop – Self organised groups (SOG's)

Taiwo attended this workshop which was facilitated by **Tracy Lambert**, UNISON regional manager. The workshop discussed how SOG's help the union build equality and challenge discrimination since prejudice and discrimination are deep-rooted in society; provide a way for members to get involved; provide an alternative pathway for trade union activism through identity politics.

Workshop – Community organising

Sajid attended this workshop which was facilitated by Matthew Danaher (Community organising coordinator). The workshop involved attendees being given practical exercises by dividing into groups which represented various concerns e.g. The Women's Institute, with the idea of interlinking their resources and trying to form partnerships with one another. Sajid found the workshop really interesting.

Now the task of the attendees is to build a strong union at their own workplaces. We are facing further cuts and the only way to fight against the cuts is to have a strong Unison. Unity is strength.

