**UNISON Community Service Group conference (15 - 17 March 2013)**

Report from Lucy Tennison, shop steward, MS Society

I set off from Euston station with (most!) of the other delegates from the Community and Voluntary Organisations branch. Manchester greeted us with driving rain but we found the hotel and settled in before everything started on Friday afternoon.

The conference was organised with seminars and workshops on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, with the official conference scheduled to take place on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning.

Delegates came from across the UK and from all sorts of different workplaces. From tiny charities with a handful of employees, to large national charities such as the MS Society. From hands-on care providers to organisations who provide information and other support.

We were reminded that Manchester has a history of industrialisation (being the first industrialised city in the world) and of struggles of ordinary people. The Peterloo Massacre occurred in Manchester in August 1819, when cavalry charged into a crowd who had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation.

Karen Jennings (Assistant General Secretary of UNISON) set the scene, noting the increased outsourcing to the community and voluntary sector (often resulting in increased stress for staff and their clients). Karen told us that There for you (UNISON's welfare charity) has given grants of over £300,000 to members to enable them to buy school uniforms for their children. It's figures like this that illustrate the devastating effect that the CON-DEM cuts are having on ordinary people.

UNISON have recently launched a new [recruitment campaign](http://www.unison.org.uk/membership/). The more members we have in each workplace (the greater our density) the more effectively we can campaign and negotiate with employers. People join trade unions for lots of different reasons - the new campaign focuses on the union's role as insurance for people at work.

We then had a fascinating presentation from James Meadway of the New Economics Foundation. James gave a radically different take on the current financial crisis than you might have heard from the government or the mainstream media. Here are some interesting facts:

* Looking at the period from 1979 to 2012, up until the crash in 2008, Labour governments ran smaller deficits than the Tories.
* The current government debt is not exceptional - the amount of national debt as a proportion of GDP was much higher in 1815 (at the height of Britain's empire building) and again after WW1 and WW2.
* Since 2008, real average wages have dropped by 3.5%. Household borrowing increased to 160% of disposable income over the same period, to compensate for the reduction in real wages.
* By 2009, the support promised to the banking sector amounted to 100% of the UK's GDP in 2009.

It was great to hear something that challenged the CON-DEM's rhetoric about more austerity and more cuts being the answer to the recession.

There are ongoing debates about how UNISON could and should organise members in the Community sector. For example, there are branches which organise all the community members in a certain location (for example, the West Midlands). There are branches which organise members who work for a particular employer, across the country (for example, Barnardo's). And there are branches like ours, which organise lots of different employers across the country. The sector is so diverse, that there's not going to be a 'one size fits all' model. Each model has its advantages and disadvantages but we need to keep experimenting to see what works best in each situation. There are also successes and challenges that we can share with other reps and branches in similar situations. Why wouldn't you want to discuss and learn from other union comrades?

Saturday morning started off with taster training sessions on campaigning and public speaking. Campaigning gave me some food for thought - about picking an issue that is important to a wide range of members and that is deeply felt by members. The introduction to public speaking (planning, preparation, presentation) was timely, since I was due to be speaking to conference in the afternoon!

I went to a session on 'How to recruit a member' which was more muted than I'd hoped but we did share experiences of joining a union for the first time and discussed the different motivations that people might have for joining.

Some delegates then caught the tram into central Manchester to attend a lunchtime rally opposing the bedroom tax. It was reasonably well attended, although the PA system wasn't working properly, so only a few people could hear the main speakers. It was clear from the number of people who'd attended and the placards they were carrying that there is a strong sense of injustice about this latest benefit cut.

Then it was time for the formal business of conference itself. This is quite a formal environment, with UNISON’s President (Chris Tansley) chairing and a podium at the front for all speakers. Each motion in turn was moved by a delegate from the branch or other group who were proposing it. All the motions were passed by conference and only one attracted any real debate.

* Organising and recruiting
  + Recruiting and organising in the community and voluntary sector
* Negotiating and bargaining
  + Community Campaign Organising
  + Living Wage in Housing Associations
  + Tackling Transphobia
* Campaigning
  + Assaults and Personal Injuries in the Community Sector
  + Valuing Maternity
  + Regional pay (proposed by CVOB)
  + Effects of Government’s austerity on Black people
  + Making auto-enrolment work
  + Resisting austerity cuts in Community
  + Violence and Aggression at Work
  + Save Our Pensions
  + Support for a Living Wage plus for all workers in Community
* Efficient and Effective Union
  + Service Group Sector Committees
  + Negotiating Equality for Disabled Members
  + Community-specific branches (proposed by CVOB)
  + Organising Disabled Members and Members with Learning Disabilities in Community
  + Community Service Group Review

Our branches motion on Community-specific branches asked UNISON to organise an open meeting to discuss issues affecting community-specific branches (multiple employers, lack of branch facility time, the role of branch-employed staff, etc), as had been agreed at the previous Community conference in 2012. This attracted some opposition from the Service Group Executive (the lay leadership of the sector in UNISON) as they felt it would exclude other types of branches. Branch delegates (including myself) argued that it was an open meeting, that anyone was welcome to attend and we were also supported by delegates from other branches. We were pleased that conference voted to pass the motion.

Overall, I think the conference was a positive experience. It was good to meet other UNISON activists working in the sector and I think it’s important that our branch plays an active part in shaping the service group’s priorities and activities. I hope that more delegates at next year’s conference will engage in debate and discussion of motions, as I think this strengthens the arguments and gives confidence to activists.

**Report by Charlie Hore, Branch Secretary**

The third UNISON Community Service Group conference was held in Manchester on Saturday 16 March, immediately following the Community Service Group Seminar. I had to work on Friday 15 March, and so I missed all of the first day of the Community Seminar, arriving in time for the London Regional meeting, which I chaired in the absence of Mary Powell.

The seminar had two workshop sessions on the Saturday morning, followed by a talk by the Chief Executive of an umbrella body for national charities. I went to a useful workshop on TUPE given by national officer Dave Johnson (although it was really just a presentation as there was no time for discussion), followed by a less useful session on recruitment.

There were also ‘taster’ sessions for particular types of UNISON training, and these were well received, but the general feeling among our delegation, and indeed among delegates generally, seemed to be that the seminar topics were mostly uninspiring.

After the speech most of the conference went to the Manchester demonstration against the bedroom tax, which although badly organised (the PA didn’t work, and if there were any stewards they weren’t visible), had an energy and an anger lacking in the seminar and conference.

The conference was supposed to run from 2-5pm on the Saturday, and from 9.30 am on the Sunday morning. In fact, all business was concluded on the Saturday.

There were 22 resolutions, 21 of which were supported by the Service Group Executive and were passed unopposed. Jean-Anne, Kola, Lucy, Rita and I spoke at various points in the discussion.

The only contentious resolution was that submitted by our branch on organising a meeting of community-specific branch secretaries. For some reason the SGE and national officials were very much against this, though none of their explanations really added up.

Rita and I met on the Friday night with national officer Simon Watson and SGE Chair Kevin Jackson, to ask us to remit the motion. We were clear that we would not remit unless the SGE made a specific commitment to address the issue, and this was finally agreed.

At breakfast the following morning I was given a piece of paper (attached) with a specific commitment to action and a timetable, and I agreed to recommend that we should remit on this basis.

The resolution came up much quicker than anyone expected, and only Lucy and Rita had seen the letter by the time the discussion started (at that point we were the only three branch delegates in the hall).

I spoke, followed by Rita, and then a platform speaker came in. Instead of reading out the proposal, she argued against the motion. I spoke to Kevin Jackson on the rostrum, saying that we could not remit on the basis of what had been said, and asked him for a second platform speaker.

The second platform speaker then attacked the motion in the same terms, going further by questioning the expense involved in setting up such a meeting.

Their speeches prompted speakers from three other branches to speak in our favour, as well as Lucy. At the end of the debate the three of us were unanimous that we should not remit, as the SGE had not kept their side of the bargain.

In my right of reply I alluded to the broken promise and said that in the light of the debate we would not remit, adding that I was surprised to hear the expense of such a meeting being questioned while we were in the Hilton Hotel. The motion was easily passed, though with only about half the hall voting.

That evening the national officers were very angry with me, saying that I had broken a promise, but I kept repeating that there had been an agreement which the SGE had not kept to. We had conditionally agreed to remit, and the conditions had not been met.

Following the end of conference a number of us went to a fringe meeting put on by the ‘Reclaim the Union’ group, which was much the best session I went to all weekend. There was a good deal of discussion about how to make next year’s conference more interesting, which we will have to follow up at future branch meetings.

Overall, I thought it was mostly a wasted opportunity of a weekend, and some serious thought needs to go into making next year’s conference livelier, more inclusive and more interesting.

Charlie Hore 27 March 2013