

What a week in Brighton!

National Delegate Conference 2018 in Brighton proved to be a humbling experience for the national leadership of UNISON. The NEC – led by the right under its 'Stronger UNISON' badge – invested heavily in its Composite A motion. 'Comp A' called for a strategic review of UNISON. UNISON has desperately needed strategic leadership for many years, but the occasion of the 25th year since the investiture of UNISON in 1993 was – if conference had stuck to the script – to herald a comprehensive review of the union's structures, organisation and resources.

Many activists welcome this overdue recognition by the leadership that much of UNISON is not fit for purpose and needs to change. However, activists from several vigilant branches spotted flaws in the strategic review which they tried to rectify by amendment. They did not want a review taking place which was led by the right without democratic oversight and accountability, nor a review which did not give branches certainty on funding.

Their amendments would require elections for representatives on the all-important review 'taskforce', and would re-commit the union to the scheme of branch funding uplifts it had affirmed in 2016 and 2017. But even these modest amendments were thrown out by the Standing Orders Committee (SOC). Despite leafletting, as conference started delegates were not yet in the mood to refer the matter back to SOC. But the seed had been planted.

On Wednesday came the debate on Comp A. About 18 speakers were lined up in the 'For' speaking chairs, all aparty to the composite. Dave Prentis moved the motion. Everyone expected Comp A to sail through – but then a plucky delegate got up on his own to speak against and remind Conference that if Comp A passed, another Motion, 129, would fall. SOC had determined that if the Comp A juggernaut passed, a more modest motion calling for more resources for branches

became incompatible and had to fall. More delegates spoke in favour, but after a while another delegate spoke against, reminding branches that did all the work to support members that they needed funding through the retention formula. And so it went on: a group of speakers for, and then a lone speaker against. A decisive intervention came in the 'against' camp when a delegate told conference that her gut instinct was that the leadership could not be trusted to deliver a review in the interests of branches and members. The mood had changed, and conference now was clearly backing speakers against Comp A.

When it came to the vote by show of hands, everyone agreed that Comp A had been lost. Estimates varied at 66:33 or 60:40 – but it was clear the motion was lost. Extraordinarily, the chair Vice-President Gordon McKay declared the motion passed! Pandemonium ensued as the chair tried to move business on, and conference stood its ground refusing to be ridden roughshod over.

After around 5 minutes of noisy challenge, the chair backed down and to great cheers called a card vote. The result of that was 61:39 against Comp A. The debate had become a referendum on trust – trust in the leadership and trust in the general secretary – and the attempt to ignore the will of conference only confirmed delegates' fears. NDC 2018 was an eye-opener for new delegates – and old hands thought it was the most exciting conference in years!

The leadership was then gripped by panic, as it feared Motion 129 (still standing on the conference agenda) would be re-prioritised and debated later in the week. The resources that the general secretary had assured branches would be there after the Strategic Review suddenly became a mortal threat to the very fabric of the union. Desperately, two videos were scheduled for Friday afternoon to waste time. Sadly, 129 was not reached. But what next? It is clear that the leadership and right-wing 'Stronger UNISON' slate walked



away damaged from Conference. With NEC elections due in early 2019, conference delegates must be reminded that if they want a fighting and democratic union, and one which responds to their needs as branch leaders – only UNISONaction candidates can deliver.

It is clear that branch resources will be discussed at NDC 2019. The only question is, will the NEC bring its own proposals to conference, or leave branches to submit their own? UNISONaction looks forward to the debate in Liverpool in 2019.

The crisis in health & social care – where next after Conference?

Delegates to Local Government Conference will have noted that the motion calling for a special NDC on the crisis in Social Care was passed overwhelmingly there without a speaker against. Yet the NEC lined up regional delegates, national retired members and others to speak against a similar motion (43) from the SE Region at NDC calling for a special conference on the crisis in Health & Social Care. Overall, less than 10 minutes of conference speaking time was allotted to this issue.

The NEC motion (39) which was passed, was full of words such as 'alarmed, deeply concerned, shocked etc. but it fails to grasp the nettle in terms of how we mobilise the health and social care workforce – alongside their communities – to make a serious challenge to the government's cuts and privatisation agenda. It also failed to tackle the issue of STPs and ACOs being cuts and privatisation by stealth and fails to offer any serious campaign.

Alongside the woeful lack of any kind of fighting leadership in the recent health and local government pay campaigns, there is clearly a lot of work to do. Our members are desperate for a fighting lead to be given. The NHS demonstration on 30 June needs to be a springboard for a major national campaign to defend jobs, services, terms and conditions within health and social care.

Nothing will be gifted to us by the Tories - we need to fight. And working class people have shown themselves willing to fight time and again – with many successes. Glenfield children's heart unit in Leicester, Chatsworth rehabilitation ward in Mansfield and the Huddersfield Royal Infirmary are three recent examples of campaigns that have won major victories. Those campaigns share many things.

They refused to accept that cuts and closures were necessary. They explored every avenue. And they mobilised the community and the workers involved. The example of UNISON members taking strike action against privatisation in Mid-Yorkshire NHS Trust is another shining example of how workers can fight back given a positive lead.

The call for a special national conference may have been defeated nationally and we should consider whether to raise this again next year (if there is still a health and social care service to fight for) but one suggestion is to push for regions to put on their own events, such as special regional councils on the Crisis in Health & Social Care, to prepare the ground for the battles to come.

Rule change defeats

As well as on Comp A, the leadership was given short shrift by conference when it tried to change the rules of the union on two key issues. Efforts were made to remove activists from branch officer positions if they did any part-time work in UNISON branches. The leadership also tried to restrict the number of key officer roles an individual activist could hold. Branches spoke passionately, without any speakers 'for' the changes at all. It was an embarrassment that the NEC could easily have avoided. It should not need activists to have to point out the real-world to the NEC.

The rest of the week...

It's impossible to do justice to the rest of the week but highlights included the packed UNISONaction fringe meeting on the Tuesday evening. 300 conference delegates heard speakers from disputes including the Kirklees Council bin workers, Birmingham Home Care workers, Wigan NHS strikers and the Salford nursery campaign. Plans were also agreed to improve UNISONaction organisation and coordination across the 12 regions.

Join us!

Join the fight for a democratic and fighting union. Get in touch with UNISONaction via the contact details overleaf to find out what is happening in your region. As grassroots activists we are building for NEC elections and for NDC 2019. We'd like you to join us!