

Unite Executive Council Report – March 2020

Monday 2 March

The meeting opened with tributes to Unite's Director of Finance, Ed Sabisky, who had sadly passed away the previous week. He had done an enormous amount to ensure that we were financially stable, to tackle the pension deficit and to ensure that we had a strategic approach to our finances for the future. He had also been a great colleague and committed to the Trade Union movement. Tributes were received from many lay members, Andrew Murray and Len McCluskey. Officers shared their memories during their reports.

Minutes of previous ECs and Finance and General Purposes Committees

- Minutes of last ordinary meeting in December 2019 – approved.
- Minutes of extraordinary meeting in January 2020 – approved subject to minor amendments. This was the meeting which considered the Union's support for the Labour Leadership and Deputy Leadership appointments. Having listened to those candidates represented, there was a very clear majority to recommend Rebecca Long Bailey for Leader and Richard Burgon for Deputy.
- Minutes of Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 16 January – agreed
- Minutes of Finance and General Purposes Committee held on 20 February – agreed

General Secretary's report – Len McCluskey

The General Secretary thanked the EC and the membership for their support and their hard work in seeking to secure a Labour Government at the last general election. It was noted that Unite had understood the challenges on the ground, especially in relation to Brexit, and had fought hard to try to win support from voters in leave areas, and it was deeply regrettable that we now had to fight a Tory government.

The General Secretary had met with the contenders for the Labour Leadership role and some of the candidates for Deputy and it was noted that there was still a month to go. The General Secretary would be seeking to ensure that Unite had discussions with the new Leader once they were elected.

The Big 4 group of unions has been expanded to become the Big 5 unions (Unite, Unison, GMB, CWU and Usdaw. The General Secretary had also had some international discussions, and highlighted those with the International Transport Federation and with Workers Uniting in the US.

Joe Anderson (Mayor of Liverpool) had spoken with the GS in order to develop a relationship with Unite around the City Deal, which sought to gain government investment in new environmentally friendly homes and green energy. There are also discussions with Bristol and other cities.

Work on improving the digitalisation of Unite's work and on retention was continuing. Every month 8,000 direct debits were stopped – in many cases, this was due to members not having sufficient funds in their account and Unite was continuing to seek ways to get members back into compliance.

Remit – there was a remit from public services about reviewing our **Strike Fund**. It was noted that this had been considered before and that the discretionary nature had been difficult. There was detailed discussion about the ways in which Branches could prepare for strike action to support strategic groups of workers. It was also noted that Branches often have a levy on members and/or hold significant funds – for example, Branches had made large donations to the Bromley strikers and this had enabled them to win a significant victory. It was agreed to ask the Public Services NISC to reconsider this.

Transport, Food, Drink and Agriculture and Equalities – Diana Holland

Diana highlighted the particular contributions that Ed Sabisky had made in the sector and in equalities – both in considering subs issues for groups of workers such as migrant domestic workers and sign language interpreters, and member benefits such as maternity benefits.

Diana also highlighted issues re coronavirus for transport workers and that guidance had been issued. The recent announcement about the third runway at Heathrow would have an impact on the sector and was subject to appeal.

Unite had put in Freedom of Information requests to various departments about airline insolvencies. They had had different responses and the Dept of Transport had had to admit that they had given incorrect information. Unite continued to lobby ministers on this.

The Government's proposals to limit industrial action in "public transport" were being looked at and Unite was working with rail unions. It was noted that this could easily be the thin end of the wedge and that this could be extended to eg bus workers and delivery drivers (especially those delivering fuel).

Remit – there was a remit from London and Eastern Region noting the work that had been done on toxic air issues and asking for a similar approach to be taken to use **of X-ray machines at airports**. It was pointed out that this was not an issue unique to the Civil Air Transport sector, and that there was not yet a level of evidence similar to that around toxic air. The remit was therefore noted.

Under the Equalities report, Unite's support for Holocaust Memorial Day and LGBT history month was outlined.

There was an update on the task group set up following last year's Rules Conference to look at how LGBT+ members and disabled members could be better involved in the work of the union and better represented amongst our workplace reps, and how our women and BAME members could be better represented on non-constitutional committees. This discussion would be continued at the equalities conferences taking place in March and April.

Some very interesting data was circulated on our membership within regions and sectors and the profile of our elected reps. Our sector has much greater representation of members from minority groups within the Union than most, and it was noted that we all had a responsibility to encourage people to consider becoming representatives. There were some issues with data (eg long standing members may not have equalities data recorded, and/or people may be reluctant to declare as being disabled if they thought they may experience issues as a result).

It was noted that action needed to be taken quickly in order to impact on the elections which would be in 2021.

An update was given on the new parental bereavement leave rights and the situation for migrant domestic workers.

Diana also reported that concerns about a transphobic cartoon in the Morning Star had been raised and the Star had apologised to the Union.

Diana reported back on a meeting she had attended organised by Oxfam on Feminist Leadership, which she said had been very inspiring.

Issues for disabled workers, often forced into self employment, were highlighted – many self employed workers earned less than the minimum wage.

Remit on Domestic Violence – a previous motion had been referred back to the Region. A reworded motion had been put forward. Much of this was very positive but there was a concern that the Union's response on this needed to be in line with its broader response to local authority cuts. Key officers were asked to have further discussions with relevant EC members. I was not at the EC when this was returned to but understand that it was subsequently passed.

Tuesday 3 March 2020

Strategy for Growth – Organising and Leverage report

Sharon Graham introduced this. Good work was being done to recruit industrial members and recruitment had stabilised (over 275,000 people have joined in the last 2 years).

3,000 pay claims had been generated using the Work Voice Pay system since the last main EC.

Work had been done to identify larger employers where there was no recognition agreement – the Community Youth Workers and Not for Profit sector shows the third highest number of employers without recognition, but this may be misleading due to the model of national organisations with separate local employers (eg Citizens Advice) which was not always picked up in the data.

There is some interesting work with eg a bus drivers' combine where people come together across companies to look at bargaining with the aim of pushing similar deals across the industry.

Over the last few years, there had been shrinkage of around 10% of people covered by collective bargaining agreements, even though the total number of agreements had held steady. Unite Organisers were meeting with people in their homes, in caravan parks etc to reach workers who were in outsourced companies, and where there was no easy collective venue (either because they work from home or because fear being identified with the Union). There was recognition that size of financial turnover might not be the best way to identify lead industrial targets and NISCS were the appropriate body to determine the priorities.

We are also working on international companies to look at how we can engage with sister unions more effectively.

Work was being done with PCS and CWU to share our leverage approach, and on developing an alternative inflation index to the RPI. This would be very important if the Government stops reference to RPI and if there are rises in the cost of living following Brexit.

There was some discussion about the data and it was agreed that in future the EC would receive data run on the same date, so that it was consistent across different reports.

International Report

Simon Dubbins gave an overview:-

- Turkey had opened its borders and there was a real likelihood of a further crisis for refugees and migrants.
- EU – we were coming closer to a No Deal Brexit. There was an update on the EU proposal for a European minimum wage. There were divisions amongst European Unions on this.
- US – it was impossible to predict the outcome of the election, and a real risk of Trump remaining in power.
- Israel and Palestine – Unite was continuing solidarity work on Palestinian rights.
- Syria – fighting was intensifying.

Work continued on international union links and work around multi-nationals.

Services Sector Report

Gail Cartmail gave an update on the public sector pensions issue following the judgement and a detailed briefing had been produced and well received by members.

She highlighted the issues affecting members in leisure and culture, where there had been a number of disputes and in particular the Bromley Library strikers.

£22k was raised from Branches by EC members to help the strikers get over Christmas and they had now won their dispute. We would now be looking at other Greenwich Leisure workplaces.

She paid tribute to Ed Sabisky who had made it possible to get the money to the Bromley strikers and who had shown complete commitment to the principle of solidarity.

Unite had a toolkit around insourcing and local authorities which was available to activists.

She highlighted the strike vote at the RSPCA and St Mungo's and the EC sent solidarity greetings to both groups of members.

Local Government pay – the 2% pay offer has been rejected by the joint unions and negotiations continue. Unite had made it a clear demand that we should have meaningful negotiations and that the initial offer shouldn't be the "final offer".

In Finance and Legal we had seen a loss of jobs in many banks as branches closed and people were encouraged to use apps instead. This had spread from small villages to larger towns and impacted not only on workers but also communities. The issue of the loss of free to use cash machines was hitting those on the lowest incomes, and the changes to overdrafts could mean that overdraft rates would rise to nearly 40%. There might be opportunities to build strong links with community branches on this issue.

Some examples were given of decent practice where members were affected by the Corona virus, including people receiving sick pay when they had to self-isolate. There were, however, real concerns about the workforce in contracted out services.

The Government was considering extending SSP to self-employed workers, but Unite would highlight that this was virtually worthless as much of the work was seasonal, and so they would not ever meet the threshold.

In response to an issue raised by our National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) members, Gail reported that national officer Siobhan Endean would be giving evidence to Government with our NUBSLI members on IR 35 – and it might be possible to use this opportunity to raise the issues presented for self-employed people in relation to Covid 19.

It was noted that in Scotland, local authority budgets had been cut by three times the amount that they had in England – the SNP had a public anti-austerity stance but in reality our local government colleagues face huge fights for jobs and services.

Overall, the picture was a challenging one, but we had various members fighting back, and mounting successful campaigns, and we were recruiting younger workers in some sectors.

Blacklisting and the investigation into prior officer conduct was raised as an issue outside of the report and an update was given by Len McCluskey.

On Tuesday evening, the EC was invited to the launch of Len McCluskey's book at Portcullis House, which was also an opportunity to meet some of the Unite group of MPs.

Wednesday Morning

Adrian Weir introduced the guidance relating to the rule changes agreed at conference last summer.

Guidance on rule changes – Community Membership: there was a thoughtful discussion on this and it was recognised that the community branches were much more developed in some areas than others, and that devolving responsibility to the regions had not been entirely successful. The aim was to have an observer to the EC once all

regions had Regional Community Committees. However, this was EC guidance and could be reviewed by the EC if eg one or two regions were unable to achieve this.

Guidance on rule changes – Health and Safety: The Health and Safety conferences were designed to be more discursive and educational than simply about motions. This would be a closed system – ie no delegates are elected from health and safety conferences to eg regional committees.

There was a discussion about the timing and how this fitted with the ordinary electoral cycle and it was agreed to hold the conferences next year to be consistent.

Remit – The Community Youth Workers and Not for Profit NISC motion on a working group on national branches was opposed from the Chair and by the General Secretary on the grounds that it was not necessary and that if we had specific issues, we could raise those directly. There were also concerns from other EC members that this could not actually be an EC working group as there were very few EC members who were from national branches. There was an offer for us to raise issues with Gail Cartmail and with the Chair and General Secretary if necessary. In the light of this, I agreed to withdraw the motion and to come back to the NISC.

Political Report

Andrew Murray introduced the report in the absence of Anneliese Midgley, who was ill. He outlined the reasons for why Labour did so well in 2017 and yet lost so badly in 2019. He noted that the EC had been very concerned about the position on Brexit and that the initial position of respecting the referendum but fighting against a hard Brexit had shifted to seeking to have a second referendum. This had played a major part in losing seats in leave areas. The other factor was that Labour had moved from being seen as representing real change to being seen in some ways the party of the establishment. Boris Johnson was able to put forward a straightforward message of “Get Brexit Done”, whilst Labour was seen as representing the status quo. Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership and manifesto had not changed significantly since 2017, and so could not reasonably be regarded as major factors per se, although the press coverage had become significantly more negative and the messaging around the manifesto commitments could have been better and more focused. The General Secretary highlighted that the loss of trust in the Labour Party had begun long before the 6 week general election campaign as the perception that Labour was becoming a remain party had taken hold.

The lack of loyalty from the PLP had made the task of the Labour leadership significantly harder, and the tasks facing the new Leader were large. The GS would meet with them and would seek a constructive relationship.

Kate Osborne, former EC member and Mick Whitley, formerly NW Regional Secretary, were both elected as Labour MPs and it was noted that there were a number of good new MPs in the Unite Group. Philippa Marsden of the EC had been elected as the first woman Leader of Caerphilly Council. All were congratulated on being elected.

He also updated on the Leadership and Deputy Leadership elections which were ongoing. The Union was supporting both Rebecca Long-Bailey and Richard Burgon in the light of the decision of the EC. Unite would be contacting the affiliated supporters to ensure that they were encouraged to vote and were aware of our position.

Jim Kennedy had served on the Labour Party NEC with distinction for a number of years and the EC noted its thanks to him for his many years of service. Howard Beckett had now replaced him on behalf of Unite.

There were Mayoral and local elections in a number of regions coming up in May.

There was a written report on the situation in Ireland, although as Annaliese was not there, she was not able to answer questions to this. The situation was complex but it was welcome that power-sharing had been restored in NI. The Irish Labour party had done very badly in the election as a result of their involvement in the coalition. Unite

had been looking at whether this was the time to consider being involved in the setting up of a new workers' party. Obviously, it would be the Irish Executive Committee that took a final view on this.

There was a discussion about various issues around the report – The General Secretary highlighted that Unite was a strong union industrially and financially and that we would retain influence as a result of this, regardless of the external challenges. Our digital strategy to increase opt into the political fund was proving very effective and we had a sizeable political fund for the future.

Finance Report

The General Secretary outlined the written report which had been prepared by Ed. He had asked colleagues to take the interim lead on various items and the Union would be looking to recruit a new Finance Director.

The General Secretary committed to providing a detailed figure for our political fund balance. Quite a high number of our new members are opting in and becoming affiliated supporters of the Labour Party. However, the % of the money that we receive from new members is lower than for longstanding members due to changes brought in in 2018. We needed to put pressure on other unions to support events such as the Durham Miners Gala, as we needed a culture in which all unions supported activity and the financial contributions were shared more across the movement.

Legal Report

Howard Beckett introduced his report and gave an update on the changes in relation to personal injury claims and the financial impact for the union, as well as toxic air cases for our Civil Air Transport members, and the Grenfell enquiry.

Remit – the Council was asked by Howard Beckett to agree not to implement a rule change passed at Rules Conference which would have created a lack of clarity about procedures for officers and staff employed by the Union and also members of Unite and after a detailed discussion it was pointed out that there was another rule which would need clarifying in order to ensure that the rule book was fair and consistent and it was agreed that a revised proposal would come back to the next EC.

Affiliated services report – work was being done to contact members who were over 60 in order to identify their retirement date with a view to ensuring that they remain in the Union when they retire. It was noted that the number of members aged under 24 was very low and that the June EC would receive proposals which would enable us to engage with a higher number of young people.

The online wills service had been very successful as had Powers of Attorney – a report would go to the next EC.

Membership report

There were some questions about the high failure rate of Paypal subscriptions which would be looked at, and on workers on full pay but who were technically apprentices. This was a way of employers abusing the apprenticeship levy and guidance would be issued. The low pay rate was now being used by new joiners to the union, rather than by existing members moving rates, which was encouraging.

Chemicals etc, Service Industries, National Young Members and Gibraltar

It was noted that good work was being done in Gibraltar, with membership increasing.

The General Secretary reported that Roz Foyer (senior organiser in Scotland for Unite) was appointed as the first woman General Secretary of the Scottish TUC and was congratulated on this. She would be a loss to Unite but obviously a gain to the wider movement.