**Report on the UNISON Retired Members Conference 2024**

**Venue Cymru, Llandudno**

**October 2024**

This was a good conference with conveniently located hotel, venue and railway station marred only by the need for a cross-country rail journey which took all of five hours with two changes. The views of the Peak district and the North Wales coast made it a little more bearable though.

The conference proper takes place on only one day with the previous day being taken up with admin and meetings. This starts with meetings for the self-organized groups for LGBT+, Black, Disabled and women members. Discussion groups followed on digital scamming, pension disinvestment, mental health, pensions and the ongoing problem of the WASPI women, with a later motion asking for redress from a new Labour Government. A useful panel discussion followed on climate change. I attended a seminar on digital exclusion which I feel is becoming increasingly important as the onward march of technology sidelines those who either do not have access to the equipment required or cannot cope with or even decide not to use it. This was also brought up in a later motion in which switching off the analogue phone service was highlighted as a little reported problem. The day was rounded off by regional meetings before retiring to prepare for a social evening in Wetherspoons.

One confusing aspect for those unused to it is that despite having the various motions numbered in the conference agenda the standing orders committee asserts itself early on by deciding to take them out of order or even not at all by deeming some to be inadmissible for such reasons as not being clear, not competent, or requiring a rule change while compositing others. The motions being ruled beyond the remit of conference are, as ever, a bone of contention. Six motions were indeed deemed to be so far beyond the pale that we were not even allowed to see them as they would put the union, especially its finances, in jeopardy.

Some topics come up every conference but this one had two unique ones due to the recent election of a Labour government. The new governments contentious decisions to retain the Tory’s two-child allowance cap and their own goal of scrapping of the winter fuel allowance gave delegates something to get their teeth into with them both being debated as composited emergency motions. No less than nine further motions on the winter fuel allowance were ruled out of order for various reasons. If only our deliberations could make a meaningful change in the real world the country would be a different place.

The SOC report followed with Rosie McGregor lightening the mood by singing us a song.

The conference proper started with motions on the WASPI problem and pensioner poverty.

Digital exclusion was highlighted especially in terms of access to GPs, banks and cash along with the difficulties people have in using technology, but I feel that these are problems which apply just as much to many others in society other than retired members.

The retention of members on retirement is a perennial subject which was held to be important but no real means of achieving this was forthcoming. It created a lot of discussion though with calls for the main union to do more in this area to avoid expertise being lost. Suggestions included calls for more training and the production of a retired members handbook.

The motion on bed blocking causing delayed hospital discharges and its consequences for social care speaks for itself and brought forwards lots of distressing anecdotes from speakers.

The unfair nature of pension differentials between the old and new state pensions caused a lot of anger. The inequity of older people being on a lower pension than younger people at a time in their life when they are in dire need was clearly stated, especially with the UK having one of the lowest pension rates in Europe. Surely age discrimination is illegal?

A motion on changes to social services proved to be the only topic of the day which attracted a speaker against because an amendment to it had been deemed out of order on the grounds that it would introduce substantial new material.

The ongoing problem of the closure of public toilets was highlighted as being a problem not just for retired people and the homeless but also for working members such as bus drivers and street cleaners. In addition, lack of provision was considered an important factor in keeping some people housebound.

All motions were carried but one subject, BDS, proved contentious and was referred back three or four times to the SOC for reconsideration. UNISON support of sanctions on Israeli goods in support of Palestine was deemed to put union funds in jeopardy as it may invite legal retaliation. The repeated reference back was eventually voted against in the interests of avoiding the repeated interruptions to business.

As in other years there was a lot of coming and going around the topics which were allowed on the agenda with a lot of delegates’ ire being aimed at the way retired members are kept away from the main delegate conference to discuss only topics which are deemed suitable for their retiree status. It therefore is no surprise that Pensions and public conveniences are a perennial topic. I expect this to continue as long as UNISON prevents retirees from having an official input on issues which are considered to be in the sole domain of working members.

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