

Unison Retired Members Conference (Brighton 7/8 October '25) by Martin Sleath

This was the first URMIC that I had attended. I was the only delegate from the Notts County branch as unfortunately our other delegate, Kath Oakley, was unwell.

I arrived in Brighton late pm on 6th Oct. All went smoothly with the journey and finding the hotel etc, conveniently located near the conference venue, Maldron Hotel, on the seafront.

The only hiccup on the first night was my sustaining an injury to my left eye by having a clash with the bedroom wall when I was up in the night. This resulted in quite a shiner by the next day!

Conference Day 1 7th Oct

Whilst there were various meetings on day 1, the conference agenda proper only takes place on day 2. However, I took part in networking and meeting with some other conference delegates in the morning and participated in leafleting arriving delegates for a fringe meeting on the General Secretary's election taking place on lunchtime 8/10. I also volunteered on the Stand Up to Racism stall in the main hall. There was a very good response and interest.

There were a handful of other stalls including a couple of Palestine Solidarity stalls and an excellent Radical Tea Towel stall with a beautifully presented display of tea towels on the stall and the wall behind.

Self organised group meetings for LGBT +, Black members, Disabled members and Women members took place in the middle of the day.

The afternoon session was taken up with a panel discussion/debate on 'Why are so many older people experiencing poverty and what can we do about it?'

There were 4 speakers,
Neil Duncan Jordan (MP for Poole currently suspended from the Labour whip for voting against disability cuts),
Morgan Vine, Director of Policy at Independent Age,
Jack Jones, policy officer at TUC and
Glyn Jenkins, Unison Pensions expert.

There were a few minutes for questions afterwards.

Some highlight points from the speakers were as follows ...big issues re pension credit take up, costs of private renting currently there are 500,000 pensioners privately renting this will treble by 2040 so hence many pensioners still have high housing costs and insecure tenure.

- There are 1.9 million pensioners in poverty and over 3 million in fuel poverty,
- all means testing is disastrous and should be opposed,
- raising of the state pension age will be disastrous,
- the lack of a proper social care policy will impact on older people,
- pensioner poverty is likely to increase unless an holistic funded approach is looked at.

One of the main points that the excellent Neil Jordan rubbished was the notion of inter-generational injustice and the dominant media narrative that many older people have a comfortable life at the expense of younger working people having to pay for it. This he argued is by the establishment as a classic divide and rule as today's younger people will be tomorrow's pensioners so as a trade union movement, we should have a vested interest in fighting for improvement and having solidarity between all ages, as pensions are effectively deferred wages.

It was quite an interesting thought-provoking session. The panel format was apparently a departure from previous conferences where they have rather a smorgasbord of issues discussed.

After the pensions panel there was a brief presentation on the newly planned Retired Members Branch officer / retired activists training. There will be various training sessions (3?) on offer to RM in 2026.

The final sessions of the day were the 6 regional meetings, of which I attended the East Midlands meeting chaired by Mary Holmes, chair of Regional Retired Members Committee. The main item discussed was the new constitution that has been drawn up and that will be discussed and approved (probably) at East Midlands Retired Members Emergency general meeting on 12th November.

Conference Day 2 8th Oct

This was the day that the main conference agenda, motions etc, was discussed. From the original 36 motions in the conference agenda report, several motions had been composited into 3 motions as they were on the same issue, this left a total of 29 motions for debate. These motions were prioritised by the standing orders committee, in the event conference got through all the motions by the 4pm deadline.

There were several motions that were ruled out of order by the Standing Orders Committee for a variety of reasons, as listed in the conference guide. There was a challenge to some of these to the S.O.C, by the submitting branches, but none of these challenges were successful. Of note regarding this was the motion submitted by South Derbyshire Healthcare which sought clarity on 'The status of retired members in Unison'. However, the S.O.C decision was that the motion was not sufficiently clear!

The conference was chaired by new Unison President Catherine McKenna.

There was a presentation of the Annual Report by Rosie McGregor, Chair NRMC (the report is available online on the Unison website). The highlight of this was Rosie McGregor concluding with a marvelous socialist song about workers unity. She's certainly got a brilliant singing voice!

After that we moved on to the motions. The majority of these were proposed by National Retired Members Organisation or Unison regions, with about 10 of them from branches. All the motions were either overwhelmingly passed or unanimously so. Most of the amendments were accepted by motion movers and were usually just enhancing the themes of the main motion, or in a couple of cases correcting the language used, eg 'older people' rather than 'elderly'.

A theme that was common through many of the speakers/motions was that of disappointment at the performance of the Labour Government since it came into office in July '24. This was particularly so with reference to Social Care and migrant workers, viz the proposal by the then Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, to withdraw the work visas of 50,000 migrant workers in the health and social care sector at a time when there are 130,000 unfilled posts.

In Comp A on 'Affordable homes for retired people' it was stated that 2 recent government reports (the Mayhem review and another by the Centre for Ageing Better) confirmed that 50,000 age appropriate homes should be built to meet the demands of an ageing population, with over 17 million over 65's by 2040. However, the current rate of building is only 7000 a year.

Motion 28 condemned the government's decision not to pay the compensation recommended by the ombudsman to WASPI women as 'a cruel blow to a generation of women'.

Motion 20 welcomed the partial U turn over the disgraceful decision to cut the winter fuel allowance, but rightly criticised the continuation of its being means tested. It re affirmed that the

traditional position of the labour movement to oppose means testing.

Furthermore, as amended, it called for the updating of the W.F.A in line with the Electricity and Gas Index. This would mean that instead of the £200 figure as frozen (pardon the pun!) from 2002, it should be now about £800 pa.

Motion 5 'Welfare not Warfare'. It was argued that this title is a theme that can be taken through all our campaigning, in particular with, according to the 'Centre for Ageing Better', one in five pensioners living in poverty. The motion pointed to the obscenity of the upgrading of Trident running into hundreds of billions of pounds while 1 in 10 pensioners being in material deprivation often choosing between heating and eating etc.

Motion 14 'Opposing Reform' was an important one, with real concerns about the rise of the far right and the current predictions that Reform may be in govt after the next election. The motion referenced how reactionary Reform's policies are, including privatising healthcare, a freeze on 'non essential' immigration causing huge staff shortages in social care and health, underfunding social care, leaving the ECHR etc.

The amendment highlighting the continuation of austerity policies by the Labour government as a major reason for the rise in the popularity of reform was carried unanimously. However, a speaker from Glasgow eloquently outlined how it was racism, and he instanced reform being heavily involved in violent racist protests at a hotel housing asylum seekers in Falkirk, that was the predominant theme through reform's policies.

Two very important motions were able to be heard towards the end of the afternoon, as speaking times had been reduced to ensure this was possible.

Comp C from Camden and Tower Hamlets branches was unanimously carried. The motion called for support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, especially in relation to the LGPS where according to analysis by the PSC more than 80 funds under LGPS had complicit investments worth more than £12 billion last year.

I note that there is over £100 million in complicit investments in the Notts Pension funds hence the ongoing campaign against this.

The LGPS must take due notice of the legitimate concerns of fund members and the TU's are the best placed to advocate such concerns.

Motion 26 'Unite for More Rights' highlighted concerns about how the recent Supreme Court ruling impinges on the rights of Trans people. The motion welcomed the Unison Women's Committee call to stand in solidarity with trans people and to respect that 'Trans Women are women, and Trans men are men and that all our LGBT + comrades must be respected '.

Apologies for not commenting on all the other motions, for reasons of space. These included issues about

- Digital exclusion,
- NHS budgeting,
- Older black men's health,
- Fuel poverty action,
- Concessionary rail travel for the over 60's,
- No to two tier state retirement pensions,
- Affiliate to Poverty Action,
- End inequality in State Retirement Pension,
- Isolation and Loneliness of the Elderly,
- Our Pension Funds in carbon investments,
- The Year of Green Unison and
- Reversing the move to increase the retirement age.

The Unison Retired Members Conference are allowed to nominate 2 motions to be taken to the National Delegates Conference. At the time of writing I don't know which 2 motions we voted to send to NDC.

All in all, it was an enjoyable conference with the clear message that there are plenty of issues that we need to be fighting over and uniting in solidarity both in UK and internationally,

Next years Retired Members Conference will be 13th and 14th October in Glasgow.

Lotta Continua!
Solidarity!

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