

Musician's Union

Kathy Dyson

TUC Women's Conference Report 2007

Support a woman's right to choose
Defend the abortion time limit

Introduction /overview

Whilst increasingly, WTUC issues remind us of Groundhog Day, in that the problems associated with equal pay, lack of good affordable childcare, lack of decent pensions, inflexible and long working hours, occupational segregation and innumerable women's health issues, seem to be perennial and intractable, there were a number of positive aspects to the conference. These included a feeling of growing strength, given the numbers of women now in work and trades unions and an awareness that we should be grateful for what we have, given the dire situation of many women and women trades unionists abroad.

WTUC has always been strongly international but the feeling now is that the survival of the trades union movement as a whole depends upon continuing to forge, build and strengthen links, policies consultations and action with international unions and in creating international solidarity on issues, in an attempt to fend off the worst excesses of global capitalism. There was also a growing understanding that to be really effective, WTUC and women's groups within trades unions generally, have to create their own agenda and promote it positively, instead of being placed routinely on the defensive within a predominantly male perspective of how our society and work/life balance should be organised. Of course, men are responding to the relentless demands of a capitalist based society and what the women are saying is that another world is possible; other ways of thinking, being and organising society so that it is more equal, fair and responsive to the needs of the whole community, in ensuring that people reach their full potential and are cared for from cradle to grave. Another growing awareness within the movement is the environment and the need for unions to take an active and positive stance to save the planet. Indeed, one general secretary from the Netherlands believed that this was the way to recruit members amongst the young who (in Holland at least), are passionate about this issue and can be galvanised into action.

Finally, Brendan Barber, the only general secretary to visit WTUC on a regular basis, was given a rough ride on talking the talk, but not walking the walk over women's issues and for the TUC being totally ineffectual in the campaign against Trident. The issue of the danger (and cost) of nuclear weapons, is one that the TUC could take on and win, if only it was not so moderate. Time and again valuable opportunities to change public opinion and policy are missed because of a lily-livered approach to campaigning and really standing up for people over capital.

Now, with more women members than men in the trades union movement, it feels like for the first time, women have the potential for real power to change the political and social agenda positively and for the good. As the FBU sisters are so fond of saying: women - stop asking nicely for what you would like and start demanding what you want. Sounds good to me.

Pat Campbell WTUC Chair's opening speech

Barbara White (who was re-elected to the Women's Committee this year), introduced the new WTUC Chair Pat Campbell and she spoke of the continuing problems that women still faced on equal pay, low pay and childcare, voicing the common held opinion that women's rights in certain areas, appeared to be going backwards not progressing forwards. She emphasised the need for women's voices to be heard and acted upon at every level of the trades union movement especially now that women workers and trades unionists outnumber men across the UK. She mentioned the attacks on the 1967 Abortion Act, for reducing the time limits and violence against women as a consequence of inequality endemic throughout society. When public services are cut, as recently happened in the civil service and NHS, this has a disproportionate effect on women because they are generally still the main carers of children, husbands and elderly relatives. Women are always the biggest losers both in terms of jobs and services and WTUC needs to defend both in the public domain. Finally, Ms Campbell urged us to keep up our spirits and to ensure that vital gains for women were not lost.

Composite motion 1 Single Equality Act and statutory equality reps

This motion, moved by Amicus, asked the TUC to strengthen its campaign in favour of the single, coherent and comprehensive new equality act which supports trades unions in addressing inequality through collective bargaining. It also asked for WTUC to lobby government to put equality reps on a statutory footing as clearly, the voluntary provision has failed. Carried unanimously.

Speech by Alison Shepherd TUC President

Ms Shepherd began on a positive note by reminding us to forget the stereotypes; women were now a majority within the TUC and that we need to build on our strengths and encourage more young women into the movement. What is clear however, is that hard won improvements to services, conditions and rights can just as easily be lost again- the price of democracy is eternal vigilance. As a lay trades union official representing people within university departments, Ms Shepherd said that she wanted to ensure that the workplace is a good place to be. She mentioned the need for the TUC generally to increase its international work reminding us of our privileged position in the UK of being freely able to organise, which is sharp

contrast to our colleagues in Zimbabwe. Ms Shepherd ended stating that the TUC was a strong force for social justice and that trades union principles translate into a civil society.

Motion 3 Gender proofing public service delivery

Moved by PCS, this motion deplored the Government's increasing determination to privatise public services, noting that most often women bore the brunt of closures, redundancies and the cutting of services. Currently, tax credits, HSE, passports and many other sections of the civil services including the probation service, are under threat. It also drew attention to the change of employment practices that often occur with privatisation that includes: job losses, off-shoring, poorer conditions of service, inflexible working and worse maternity provision. The motion called the on the TUC to support the campaigns against privatisation of public services and to lobby for the gender proofing of procurement procedures and contract monitoring. Carried unanimously.

Motion 4 Promoting the Gender Equality Duty

This motion, moved by the CSP, noted that from April 2007 there is a statutory duty on all public authorities to eliminate unlawful sex discrimination and to actively promote equality of opportunity between men and women. It called upon the TUC to ensure that affiliates were aware of the Gender Equality Duty; to offer guidelines for its implementation and to lobby Government to make sure that the duty is enforced and monitored. Carried unanimously.

Emergency motion 2 Abortion Rights

Moved by the RMT, this motion referred to the attacks on the 24 week time limit for abortions and asked the TUC to provide more information to affiliated unions about why some women need late abortions in order to counteract the upsetting propaganda that has been put out by pro-life groups. One compelling reason for late abortion is the need for two doctor's agreement and the state of disarray in the NHS causing a post-code lottery for abortion services around the country. The motion reaffirmed WTUC's support for women's right to choose and again reiterated the sentiment that hard one rights can easily be eroded or revoked unless they are fought for. Carried unanimously

Motion 5 Campaign for Women's Rights

The motion, moved by the UCU welcomed the Gender Equality Duty, but called on the TUC for more positive campaigning on women's rights throughout the labour movement. The speaker drew attention to the fact that trades union policy is centred predominantly on men's life and work pattern.

She asked the question: what would a women's union agenda actually look like? She also made the point that it is often easier to tackle the effects of the men's agenda rather than to take on the underlying ideology and called for a radical feminist labour movement. Carried unanimously.

TUC Equal Pay Archive DVD

Highlights from the TUC film were shown which documented the stories of various equal pay campaigns from Dagenham machinists, a cook at the Govern shipyards, the Cumbrian NHS cleaners and NHS workers in Ireland. The women and their union officials described the long and hard fought battles with their respective managements and emphasised that solidarity, persistence and assertiveness were the key qualities that won the day.

Motion 6 Time off for dependents

Moved by USDAW, this motion noted that time off to meet caring commitments is crucial for parents and carers of elderly or sick relatives and that whilst unpaid leave is generally available, many people cannot afford to take it. It called upon the TUC therefore to lobby the Government for the right to at least ten days paid leave for family emergencies and to encourage employers to give paid time off where needed. Carried unanimously.

Emergency motion 3 Lone Parents

Moved by the T&G, this motion opposed benefit cuts to lone parents (even more relevant in the light of recent figures on increase of child poverty in the UK), and disagreed with Government policy of forcing lone parents into work because it failed to take into account the needs of parents and children. They are also concerned that single mothers on incapacity benefit need more support. The motion called on the TUC to campaign for a fair strategy for lone parents to ensure that the welfare of all children is of paramount importance; to improve their financial security; to promote stronger family friendly rights and to fund assistance, without compulsion for lone parents seeking work. Carried unanimously.

Motion 7 Maternity pay in the public sector

Moved by the FDA, the motion explained that despite the extension of maternity leave to 39 weeks that comes into force on April 1st 2007, Government has directed civil service departments not to extend their full pay provision beyond 26 weeks. The speaker highlighted the continuing, structural inequality within the civil service which still has a male dominated hierarchy and noted the empty rhetoric on vital women's rights. The conference called on the Government to lead by example and promote best practise by encouraging a coherent approach to maternity leave with improved benefits. Carried unanimously.

Motion 8 Sexist language, sexist bullying and sexual harassment

Moved by the NUT, this motion outlined the problem of violence against girls and women at work and in the home from sexist language, bullying and harassment. The speaker drew attention to mainstream culture which imposes views of masculinity and femininity that systematically devalue women and noted that an NUT survey of schools found widespread sexist and sexual language and the bullying of teachers and pupils. Many teachers experience was that management were quite useless in tackling these problems and were described as being 'all words, no backbone'. The motion called on the TUC to raise awareness of the sexist and sexual bullying of young women; condemn and challenge sexual harassment in the workplace and to remind workers of their statutory rights to protection from sexual harassment and employers of their responsibilities to female employees. Carried unanimously.

Agnes Jongerius President FNV

Agnes addressed the conference as President of the FNV the Netherlands equivalent of the TUC. She said she was honoured to be at such a beautiful conference and praised the diversity in age and ethnicity of the delegates, saying that obviously in the TUC women mattered. As the first women president of the FNV, she said that we can make a difference, and that in the Netherlands they have a consensus kind of political process which though long winded, involves employers, employees and unions in debate, discussion and consultation before any law is passed. However, the trades unions were losing members worldwide, 2% year on year; they were much less visible and having problems in interesting and organising young people and are still regarded as old fashioned.

However, Agnes thought that the major problem that the trades unions have in 2007 is finding an answer to globalisation; we are continually forced into a defensive position and in many places and instances women are the major victims of privatisation and globalised economic practices. The trades union movement has not done enough to combat the excesses of global capitalism and women in particular have a different agenda to men which is both inspirational and important. Agnes thought that if women could determine the trades union agenda it would comprise of taking care of the environment, taking care of people and combining care of children with a flexible job. This would involve men taking a larger share of childcare than they are now able to; companies not polluting the environment and profits not taking precedent over people. Child labour would be ended and there would be an improved quality of life for all. This different agenda provides for innovation within the trades union movement and also a chance to recruit young people who (in Holland at least) are fed up with the irresponsibility of the trans-nationals, and the hedge fund owners and are sick of world poverty and damage to the environment. Agnes felt that globalisation could be countered by global unions and unionisation of labour with the remit of creating decent work, better conditions and living wages for all. Her own union had taken the step of taking care of the environment as a central platform for its policies and an integral

part of all union negotiations. Agnes ended by reiterating again the need to engage the young with policies against world poverty and environmental issues and the need to completely change the trades union agenda into a women orientated one.

Motion 9 Valuing part time work

This motion, moved by Prospect, welcomed the recognition by the Women and Work Commission of the importance of part time work and the need to change the working culture to promote its value. It called on the TUC to promote the value of quality part time working and to lobby the Government to fully adopt the WWC recommendation and to implement its own policy with regard to the civil service. Carried unanimously.

Emergency composite motion 1 TUC childcare provision

Moved by the PCS, this motion deplored the decision of the General Council not to expand on current TUC childcare provision for in session hours only childcare for conferences and other union events. This action was seen as discriminatory against women wanting to attend fringe or other social events as a necessary part of going to a conference and expanding knowledge and networks. In addition the GC also changed its policy so that child care is no longer provided for school aged children, making it extremely difficult for women with children of school age and younger, to attend. The general consensus from the floor was that parents were fully capable of making informed decisions and negotiating with schools about specific absence without the TUC needing to police them and that conferences were by their nature, very educational places. The NASUWT disagreed; calling such absences truancy and a lively debate ensued about whether children could and should learn outside of school. The motion called on the Women's committee, to lobby the GC to reverse these changes with immediate effect and to provide care of all children in and out of core hours. Carried with NASUWT and NUT opposing.

Motion 10 Age discrimination in accessing employment

This motion, moved by the NASUWT, welcomed the recent Employment Equality (Age Discrimination) Regulations as a positive step towards eliminating age discrimination in the workplace. However, the speaker was concerned that the regulations do not fully address the disproportionate discrimination that women face as various stages of their careers and that more need to be done to promote the cultural change needed for true equality. It called upon the TUC to campaign for changes to the Regulations in order to strengthen the rights of women workers to equal access to all employment and to conduct research into women's employment and the impact of age on their access to senior posts. Carried unanimously.

Motion 11 Age discrimination in broadcasting

Moved by Equity, this motion stated that in spite of the Employment Equity (Age) Regulations 2006, Equity's older women members were routinely denied the opportunity to work due to the lack of parts for older women in film, TV and theatre. Despite the Helen Mirren effect, the near invisibility of older women on our screens reflects neither demographic changes nor the richness and diversity of older women's lives, and this has a negative impact on their income just when they are at the apex of their powers. Increasingly, women actors are encouraged to use cosmetic surgery so as to look younger and compete with younger actors. The motion called upon the Women's Committee to raise awareness of the inadequate representation of older women on film and TV and how the negative influence of the media militates against achieving age equality. Carried unanimously.

Composite motion 2 Pensions

This motion, moved by TSSA, recognised that despite proposed Government reforms, the current pension system continues to fail women who consistently lag behind men, with 1 in 4 women pensioners living in poverty, 90% of whom receive a basic state pension of £63 a week. The main problem remains the earnings gap and the NI contributions which tend to be interrupted when women have families and/or work part time. The motion called for the TUC to campaign for an extension of carers credits to NI; for full protection of pensions under TUPE and to continue to highlight the inequalities in pensions. Carried unanimously.

Motion 13 Personal debt

Moved by the CSP, this motion highlighted the problem of personal debt now running at on average between £8-10k per person in the UK and linked the problem to enticements by banks and loan companies and the general consumerist nature of society where retail therapy is seen as a normal activity and panacea. In addition, students now regularly end their studies with £10-30k of debt and the impact of personal debt on health and well being is negative, leading to anxiety, stress and depression. It was also noted that those on very low incomes also fall prey to loan sharks and have to borrow in order to pay for bare necessities. The motion called on the TUC to encourage Government to improve education on financial issues, including the consequences of falling into debt; to provide more access to free financial advice and to ensure that finance companies are obliged to be more responsible and to provide clearer information. Carried nem con.

Motion 14 Sweatshop labour

This motion, moved by the RMT, outlined the appalling conditions and wages endured by sweatshop workers across the globe, the majority of whom are

women. There are an estimated 170,000 workers illegally employed in sweatshops within the UK who have no rights and no union representation. Many work as machinists for Nike, Adidas, Primark and other trans nationals who make vast profits from their work, but many are also employed in cleaning, catering, transport and agriculture. The strongest protection is being in a trades union and the motion asks the TUC to develop a strategy to recruit and organise low paid workers; to publicise the plight of sweatshop workers (and make the buyers aware of workers conditions) and to work with the 'No Sweat' campaign. Carried unanimously.

Solidarity with Iraqi women

The conference expressed solidarity with women in Iraq who are struggling to advance workers rights in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. In particular conference condemned the threats made to Houzan Mahmoud if the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq by so-called Islamic fundamentalists. Conference welcomed the statement by the General Federation of Iraqi Workers Women's Committee on International Women's Day part of which stated: 'Iraqi women trades unionists are determined to defend the fledgling democracy in our country. We are committed to carry on campaigning for jobs, better wages and equal opportunities for all Iraqi women.' During the debate it was pointed out that Iraqi trades union were in this position due to the invasion of Iraq by the US and the UK.

Composite Motion 3 Human trafficking and migrant domestic workers

Moved by the T&G, the motion recognised and deplored the increase in human trafficking particularly of women and girls across Europe, for sexual exploitation and forced labour in conditions close to slavery. It is truly ironic that in the year that celebrates the abolition of the historic slave trade, slavery in many forms continues in hidden ways. The UK is a top destination for human trafficking which is regarded by the criminal fraternity as a high profit and low risk activity. The motion called in the TUC and the Women's committee to lobby Government to sign up to the European Convention on Human Trafficking; to give good support to its victims; to develop a national strategy to tackle violence against women; to enforce the minimum wage effectively and to drastically increase the penalties which can be imposed upon those convicted of profiting from trafficking. It also called on the Women's Committee to forge links across Europe and internationally to strengthen the trades union campaign against human trafficking. Carried unanimously.

Motion 17 Violence against women

The motion, moved by Accord, welcomed Amnesty International's campaign to 'Stop Violence Against Women' but noted that this was not confined to the domestic arena but was being used as a weapon of political repression by various regimes around the globe. In Columbia in particular, rape and

mutilation is used by paramilitaries as part of their terror tactics. The motion called on the TUC to lobby Government to end their financial and military support of Columbia in line with an Early Day Motion submitted by Frank Doran, and to work more closely with international human rights organisations to end this violence. Carried unanimously.

Motion 18 Female genital mutilation

Moved by ALSEF, this motion condemned the barbaric and dangerous practice of genital mutilation, which reduces the vagina to a tiny aperture, causing severe pain, shock, blood loss, infection, urinary problems and causes major difficulties in childbirth and complications in pregnancy. The World Health Organisation estimates that annually, 140 million women worldwide and 6,500 within the UK are subjected to this abuse, despite legislation against it. The motion called on the Women's Committee to raise this issue with the TUC and awareness of it with all international TUC affiliates. Carried unanimously.

Motion 19 Women in Zimbabwe

Moved by the FBU, this motion welcomed the TUC's longstanding relationship with the trades union movement in Zimbabwe, but recognised that despite the assistance and support of affiliates, millions of women, due to financial and political constraints were without safe and affordable sanitary products. With inflation running at 1000% women have to pay 50% of their monthly salary (if they are able to work) on sanitary products and so are forced to use old newspapers and rags. This has led to an increase in vaginal infections, infertility and depression with many women too embarrassed to attend work during their monthly periods due to completely inadequate sanitary protection. Subsequent treatment for infections is also unaffordable or unavailable adding to the stress and ill health that many women face. The motion called on the TUC to write to the Zimbabwe High Commission and Government; to lobby the British Government to support the campaign; to send donations to the sanitary appeal and to download the 'Dignity. Period' information relating to this issue. Carried unanimously.

Motion 20 British foreign policy should respect the rights of the child

This motion, moved by Napo, focused on the damage caused to children, including death and injury, loss of relatives, homes, education and general trauma, as a result of British foreign policy in Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan, and the Middle East in general. This violation of childhood and basic human rights, is in direct contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the motion called for the British Government to pursue a foreign policy that respects not destroys life. It also called on Government to provide funds and resources to rebuild the lives of surviving children in these areas of conflict. Carried unanimously.

Motion 21 the Miami 5

This motion, moved by the MU, concerned the trial and detention in the US of five Cuban nationals known as the Miami 5 who were sent to the US by the Cuban government to expose terrorist threats against Cuba and who were subsequently arrested and detained by the US, and finally given long custodial sentences. It has become clear that gross injustice has taken place and the trades union movement is trying to redress it and help with their campaign. In addition their families have been denied access to the US to visit them. The motion calls on the TUC to support the petition for a retrial; to ensure that any subsequent judicial process is fairly conducted and to campaign for their unconditional release. Carried unanimously.

Motion 22 Women's representation

Moved by the CWU, this motion called on the TUC to produce a comprehensive booklet for WTUC 2008, that gives the facts and figures on women's involvement in union structures; identifies where unions are progressing proportionality within their organisations and highlights what measures unions are taking to overcome barriers to women's equality. Carried unanimously.

Motion 23 Single staffing

Moved by Community, this motion drew attention to the increasing practice of single staffing across a range of employments and the implications for the health and safety of staff working on their own. Betting shops were highlighted as potentially dangerous places for single staff who are not only unable to take breaks but handle large amounts of cash. Unison was against the motion and called for risk assessments instead. The motion called on the TUC to press Government to introduce legislation to end single staffing in betting shops and similar establishments in order to reduce the risk of violent crime and for health and safety issues. Carried nem con.

Motion 24 Discrimination and IVF treatment

This motion, moved by the GMB, deplored the plans by the British Fertility Society to remove the right of overweight women to IVF treatment, on the grounds that obesity can influence the outcome of treatment. Fertility treatment generally is a post code lottery, and obese women can still get private fertility treatment if they are willing or able to pay £3000 for each cycle. The motion called on the Government to reject the BFS recommendations and allow fertility treatment for all who require it, especially given the current low birthrate. Carried nem con.

Speech by Brendan Barber General Secretary TUC

After thanking the WTUC for the opportunity to address it, Brendan paid tribute to two pioneering women trades unionists, Gina Morgan and Ada Maddox, both of whom had died this year. He reminded conference that there was still a long way to go before women achieved genuine parity with men on equality of opportunity, equal pay and pensions. The cost of women not achieving their full potential is in the region of £23bn, due to occupational segregation, lack of opportunity for promotion, unemployment due to childcare issues and low pay. In the ten years of a Labour Government, the gender pay gap has barely shifted and it will take another 80 years at the current rate of progress, to achieve parity. Politicians have to bite the bullet on issues of discrimination in the light of recent research where over half of all pregnant women have suffered unfair treatment or harassment at the hands of employers and the indications are that mothers are the most discriminated section of society. Brendan too highlighted the fact that women in the TUC now represent 7 out of 10 workers and that women should be better represented throughout the trades union hierarchy, but especially at the top. He also emphasised the plight of migrant workers, home workers and children in the workforce as some of the most vulnerable and low paid members of society, and that unions need to reach out to them to help improve their situation. He mentioned too the growing importance of the international work of the TUC and the need for solidarity with trade unionists in countries like Columbia, Zimbabwe and Iraq who are in a desperate situation facing violence, repression, food shortages as well as the normal trades union issues. During the question and answer session Brendan was asked about the TUC's opposition to Trident, which was minimal as they were still consulting affiliated unions, although they urged MP's not to support it. He was also asked about childcare and the General Council's decision to cut it back, and about TUC policy regarding privatisation. This was followed by questions on further education provision and TUC support for it, hedge funds and pensions.

Summary

Once again, WTUC was an interesting and lively conference with the usual high level of speakers and diverse debate and while I feel we are still at the margins, with increased women membership within the trades union movement and the creation of an entirely different women centred agenda, the TUC and the WTUC could evolve into very new entities in the next ten years and have a much greater and more effective impact both within the UK and internationally.