Speakers

We all enjoyed Helen Pankhurst’s visit. Helen is of course the great-granddaughter of Emmeline Pankhurst and the granddaughter of Sylvia Pankurst, both leaders in the suffragette movement and Helen herself is an international development and women’s rights activist and writer. Whilst Helen acknowledged the great achievements that have been made towards equality, she also spoke about the continuing issues of inequality around the world, in the workplace and within family settings - many women still face violence and a power imbalance in their relationships. Helen urged that we all still need to keep campaigning as there is so much to achieve.

Helen also pointed out of the striking parallel of today’s life issues such as politics, work and money, identity and family, violence versus women, culture and opportunity, to the suffragette movement. The emphasis was on the need to challenge these inequalities by action not just words.

Dave Prentis, General Secretary of UNISON also came to speak to conference. It was good to hear from Dave and he was as enthusiastic as ever and seemed to be very supportive of the work of the Women’s conference. I (Katharine) was particularly pleased to hear Dave reiterate his support for Jeremy Corbyn and his policies.

Conference listened with interest to a speaker who told us about the campaign to get the International Labour Organisation to recognise child marriage as child labour. I was at the National Delegates Conference 2017 where delegates voted to support this campaign. Dave Prentis (General Secretary, UNISON) has written about this on his blog, at this address online; https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2018/03/blog-child-marriage-child-labour/

Many delegates spoke to move motions, to speak in favour or against motions or to ask that ‘the question be put’ (when a delegate asks that we move straight to a vote on the motion, without hearing any more speakers). Conference is a supportive, inclusive environment where delegates can speak up, regardless of their background and experience. There are plenty of people around willing to offer advice and encouragement.

Highlights

- I spoke to delegates who I’d met at previous conferences again.
Stalls – there were many stalls to look at in the conference centre. Exhibitors included various organisations promoting their causes about human rights and social justice, for example, the Free Palestine campaign and Action on Elder Abuse. I enjoyed talking to stallholders about their areas of expertise and I learnt a lot about various issues.

It was great to be at conference, around so many women who share similar views although from such a diverse variety of backgrounds. We all felt we had had some interesting and enjoyable discussions with other delegates and found the environment very supportive. It was useful to hear delegates speak about their own experiences relating to motions, to give an idea of how the different issues affected their personal or working lives. One speaker worked in Homecare in Birmingham and was due to go on strike due to imposed changes in their shift pattern. An emotive speech was given about the impact this would have on work/life balance.

The hotel was great, and well located, just opposite the conference centre. The crèche facilities were excellent and I felt confident that the children in their care were safe and happy. It was nice to be in Liverpool for a change, as the conference is usually in Brighton.

Seminars

Bargaining on mental health policies

The seminar had a large audience of women from diverse backgrounds. Discussions were around the fact that branches need to ensure that organisations treat mental health with the critical importance it deserves, that procedures protect the mental health of staff in general.

Bargaining on good mental health policies can have significant benefits for branches and stewards. Some of these benefits include:

- Reduction of caseload
- Freeing up stewards time
- Freeing up time for branch activists to increase their knowledge of issues such as reasonable adjustments, disability leave and improve their ability to represent members
- Engagement may result in disabled members’ self-organised group, building activists to negotiate further policy improvements
- Agreeing successful policies can be used as a local recruitment tool to demonstrate Unison’s clout with the employer and what Unison can deliver for their members.
Barriers to Engaging with Employers were debated, some of which include:

- Employers hiding behind the Existing policies
- Home Working Policy – impact of working long hours resulting in high stress levels and the fact that some women have not got this choice, mainly in lower paid jobs.
- Stigma attached to Mental Health stresses
- Ignorance/Unsympathetic Managers

Solutions to Engaging Employers

- Review policies
- Use of Health and Safety Policy/ Equality and Impact Assessment Policy to challenge existing policies
- Sickness absence related to stress – encourage members to record stress as Health and Safety issue.
- Encourage members to talk about Mental Health related stress without stigmatisation
- Encourage Employer to sign up to “Time to change” or time to talk.
- Mental Health awareness; mental health awareness day/stress network.
- Become a Women’s Officer
- Health and Safety Training

Campaign against Street Harassment

This was a seminar about how girls and young women continue to be sexually harassed by strangers as they go about their daily lives and the impact this has on people. Participants discussed their own experiences and ideas about how this behaviour can be stopped.

Main Conference Sessions: Interesting Motions

Non binary inclusion – the ability to discuss this emotive issue gives greater credence to whatever decisions are made. This motion was passed and created a lot of debate. As the motion included raising awareness of non-binary and dispelling myths, this has enabled members to be informed and to engage in discussions.

Low pay amongst women members – a startling statistic given is that 3.7 million workers are in poverty, which is an increase on previous years.

Mentoring and Developing women in Unison to enable women to participate at all levels, including in region and nationally - One interesting idea put forward was to use retired members for this, utilising knowledge and skills gained from their involvement with Unison.
Effective rights for part-time and flexible workers was raised, with one of the biggest barriers that even though it is a right to request flexible working it frequently not granted, impacting hugely on women’s lives.

Lack of participation of Black women in Unison - It was noted that despite statistics telling us that Black people are amongst those that are likely to join a union, and women making up 70% of Unison membership, black women have very few representation at the Branch, regional and national level. It was highlighted that there is need for activists to have full inclusion, build up confidence and expertise to increase fair representation and proportionality.

A high percentage of Black women members are working in health, social care and local government sector; and many are low paid members. Hence it is crucial that Unison and the National Women committee continue to lead the way in its view that diversity and inclusion in our society adds value to us all.

There is still need to continue to challenge racism, poverty and race inequality.

Actions following conference...

Ruth has decided to play an active role in Unison. Currently exploring to be a learning and development officer and to utilise this opportunity to bring awareness and encourage other colleagues to become unison members.

I (Katharine) will continue to challenge inequality with renewed enthusiasm and I am considering getting more involved in local politics.