

UNISON Matters

Aberdeenshire

The branch delegation was very active at this year's conference and raised the national profile of the branch. We had a motion and two amendments on the agenda. Both Kate Ramsden, Branch Chair and Susan Kennedy, our first time delegate, spoke at conference.

Time to address mileage rates 'disgrace'

Close to the hearts of our members is the thorny issue of mileage allowances. The branch's amendment on this issue was incorporated into a composite motion and debated at Conference.

Our first time delegate, Susan Kennedy, spoke to our amendment and highlighted the particular case of low paid members in rural areas who pay a larger proportion of their salary on mileage costs and can end up subsidising the council due the large distances travelled and low mileage rate.

The 40p is the figure set by the Inland Revenue and any additional payment from an employer is taxed, leaving staff no better off.

UNISON will now seek urgent negotiations with the Inland Revenue for an increase in the seven year old 40p 'approved' mileage rate. Conference also called for regular reviews of the rate.

Susan told conference that this is not a green issue. She said, "We applaud the reduction in non-essential car use that the rising fuel costs have brought about. But our members, especially those in rural areas, need their cars to do their jobs. They don't have a choice.

"They need their cars to make sure that vital services are provided to the most vulnerable in our society. Services like home care for the elderly and disabled - a lifeline in rural communities, but provided by some of our lowest paid members.

"Whilst prices have come down since the fuel crisis last year they are still high, and running a car for work eats into our members' incomes and for low paid members risks becoming a pay cut.

"The mileage allowance paid by most authorities in Scotland is 40p per mile. This has not been increased since 2002 and that is a disgrace", she added as she called for the union to put pressure on the government for an immediate rise in the mileage rate determined by the Inland Revenue and an agreement for regular reviews.



Local Government Conference pledges support for all members in the recession

This year's Local Government Conference focussed on key issues for our members, like the issues facing social work and education, and the voluntary sector. There was also a great deal on equalities, especially at a time of recession and conference confirmed our union's commitment to protect groups such as our disabled, LGBT, black and women members, in these financially challenging times.

"We found local government conference to be less dominated by England and Wales issues unrelated to the situation in Scotland. This year's conference concentrated on issues which affect members across the UK, even where services are managed differently and subject to different law. In fact we only voted on one motion affected by the rule which restricts voting by one or other of the delegations from the devolved administrations."

Branch speaks up for social work

"It is always a tragedy when a child dies and especially when a child dies at the hands of the people who should have been caring for and protecting them."



Aberdeenshire's motion on social work, approved at the AGM in February, was merged into a composite motion along with motions from seven other branches and regions.

This brought the crisis being faced by Social Work members to the fore as Local Government delegates backed a range of measures to campaign against cuts and for more resources.

The composite included a call for UNISON to take a key role in publicising the difficult working conditions for many social care staff. But, crucially, UNISON will also highlight all the excellent work done by its members every day to protect children and other vulnerable people.

Kate Ramsden, Branch Chair, spoke of the particular pressures facing our members working in child protection.

"When this happens though, my heart always sinks because alongside the individual tragedy, I know that somewhere along the line the media and politicians will need someone to blame and the moving finger is most likely to stop and stay at social work".

Conference heard of the outrageous caseloads and the staffing crisis in many councils. But speakers also pointed to the great work done despite these pressures.

Kate said it was time to 'speak up for social work'.

"Conference, please support your colleagues in social work, not only by passing this composite, but also by defending social work whenever you hear it criticised".

Such was the level of interest in the debate and the level of support from Conference, it is clear that Social Work staff are at last being heard. All we need to do now is convince the media!



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Defend our public sector pensions

Conference supported a composite motion which included the branch's motion, and condemned attacks on public sector pensions by press and politicians. It recognized that this threat will only grow if a Tory government gets into power at the next general election and threw its weight behind a range of measures to defend our members' pensions.



Kate Ramsden, Branch Chair and conference delegate told conference that it has been open season on

our pensions with the press referring to them as "gold plated" and a "luxury the country can't afford.

But an average local government pensioner gets just £74 per week. "Not a huge amount, said Kate, but without it

they would be forced onto full state pension and would face poverty in old age."

She slammed the Tories plans to "reform" our pension. "We should be clear that by this they mean the destruction of public sector pensions," said Kate, rejecting accusations that our pensions are unsustainable and unaffordable.

She called on the NEC to provide information to all our members on the plans for public sector pensions of all the parties standing for election to enable members to make an informed choice about who they vote for, and she urged delegates to campaign in their branches to defend pensions.

"This fight belongs to all of us. These are our pensions which are under threat and we all must take responsibility for defending them - not just for ourselves but for all those who may yet work in public services," said Kate.

Domestic violence is a workplace issue

But debate on perpetrators continues

Conference backed a strategy to negotiate workplace agreements on domestic abuse, giving better support to victims, but failed to grasp the nettle of what to do about perpetrators.

The National Women's Committee did not support the branch's amendment which made it clear that perpetrators of abuse will be in our membership as well as victims. and called for action to encourage perpetrators to address their behaviour. The amendment also called on the union to 'publicise its zero tolerance of domestic violence alongside services that are in place to manage perpetrators and help them address their behaviour."

The National Executive Council (NEC) asked the branch to remit the amendment, that is, to withdraw it from the conference agenda. In return, they agreed to consider the terms of the amendment when acting on the motion. Your delegation reluctantly agreed to remit our amendment to the NEC.

Kate Ramsden, Branch Chair, speaking to the Aberdeenshire amendment before agreeing to remit, said, "We should remember that the victims of domestic abuse are not just those who experience it directly",

and pointed out that children living in households where abuse takes place can also be significantly affected.

"We must give a clear message that we have zero tolerance of domestic violence", added Kate. "However, we must also recognise that those who perpetrate abuse do so often as a result of their own life experiences... they need support to confront and address their behaviour".

She added, " We are puzzled by the National Women's Committee's opposition but have accepted their assurance that the new model guidance will include the union's commitment to enabling perpetrators of domestic violence to address their behaviour, whatever their gender may be, and will publicise the programmes available to them."

City of Edinburgh had a similar amendment but refused to remit. This was heard and debated but defeated on a vote.



"First Time Delegate, First Time Speaker!"

Here Susan Kennedy describes her experiences as a first time delegate to Annual Conference.

When I was elected to join the branch Delegation to Unison's Local Government and National Conference in Brighton I was thrilled, until at a later date when Kate Ramsden asked if I would be interested in speaking in support of the branch's 'mileage allowance' amendment - then I began to feel nervous about going. But not to worry I thought, Kate had written the speech so all I had to do was pluck up the nerve to stand in front of around 3000 delegates and deliver it - no problem!

I had no idea what it would be like at the conference, so I took advantage of an invitation for first time delegates to go along to the Brighton Conference Centre to be shown the ropes, so to speak. The proceedings were explained and we were shown the rostrum which was a very clever unit able to adapt to a delegate's height and volume automatically. We were told how to address the conference if we wanted to get up and speak in support of or in opposition to a motion. It didn't seem too bad - but then I was only stood up in front of 12 other people!

When we arrived at our seats on the first day, we picked up our conference papers and voting cards and we were off. Some of the debates seemed to go on forever and some were very quick. There was the odd rumble of discontent from a few delegates or overheated points of view, which made proceedings more interesting and entertaining. There were some great speakers and a few not so great. All the time I was making mental notes as to how best to deliver my speech if it came up as scheduled on Friday.

Friday afternoon - I reflected on my time at conference - it had been a long but enjoyable week, listening to the various debates and guest speakers and I had enjoyed casting my vote; I looked forward to my daily copy of Scotland in Unison; it was great to meet other like minded and interesting people and to enjoy the social aspects of Brighton itself. But business had not yet ended as Madam President announced it was time to move on to Composite C 'mileage allowance'.

As I stood at the rostrum, being spurred on by Kate, Ian, Bob and John, my body shaking uncontrollably, I uttered....."First time delegate, First time speaker"..... and I was off and running. It was scary but I did it.

I will never forget what a wonderful time I had that week and I would recommend to anyone interested in being a delegate to try it at least once.

Congratulations for the second time

Janet Marchant of Inch you were last times winner as well and a cheque for £25 is on its way.

Another chance to win £25

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