

Community and Voluntary Sector Conference 2023

The Community and Voluntary sector Conference was held on Friday 3rd – Saturday 4th March 2023. I was attending with Branch Service Group Executive member Paul Turnbull, unfortunately Paul came down with suspected Covid only hours before he was due to leave so could not attend, what turned out to be a very interesting and constructive conference.

The conference was held in Bournemouth and was attended by 120 delegates from all the Regions and Nations Unison represents.

Day 1.

Friday began with Delegate workshops then after lunch, the seminar was opened by Malcolm Gray, from the Community Service Group. The much anticipated speech from General secretary Christina McAnea had to be delivered by a stand in, as our GS had been called to talks on the latest NHS crisis. Claire Williams delivered the address and then answered follow up questions with support from Jon Richards and Gavin Williams.

The highlight of Friday for me was the Resolution Foundation speaker Nye Cominetti. Nye delivered an early release of a report titled, 'Who Cares? The experience of social care workers and the enforcement of employment rights in the sector'. The report is due out in May 2023, and the research completed will go towards campaigning for better terms and conditions in this vastly underpaid sector. Some of the issues highlighted, were the poverty wages along with the huge commitment and personal involvement, that workers in this sector give. It gave rise to an insightful comment that '*the type of people who do these jobs influence the pay received*'. The meaning of this is that statement, is that we don't do the role for the money alone, and can't walk away from vulnerable people, many who have become as close as friends and family.

The last speaker of the day was Jo Galloway, Unison Regional secretary, who spoke about the Organising and Recruitment Strategy Development Project. This came from a previous conference and is being supported by your NEC.

There were then a choice of 4 workshops which you could attend, depending on your interest, though all were significantly relevant, to workers in this sector. For completeness these were:

1. Promoting racial equality in elections and in the workplace; this workshop centred around the new voter ID legislation.
2. How procurement works in Local Authorities; and included good practice of the use of Unison's Ethical Charter.
3. Ending Violence at work; looked at the legal health and safety protections and Unison's Violence at Work Charter.
4. Find out what is happening to your pension and how to organise to improve it; this was an introduction to the state pension and the threats it faces.

Day 2.

The second day was the main purpose of the conference, motions. This was the first C&V Conference that I had attended, so I was very interested to see what the main issues this sector

wanted addressing. I also confess, being a part time Personal Assistant that I am also a 'worker' in the C&V sector, so keen to know what my 'colleagues' see as the main issues.

Conference heard a total of 14 motions, with similar themes running through many. Poverty levels of pay was issue raised by Motion 6 Low pay in the V&C Sector, as well as other motions on Championing the real living wage (7) and Charity Sector Pay (9) and motion 11 Staffing crisis in Social Care, which asked for a National regulated pay structure.

Another topic heavily represented in motions, was that of Sick pay. The majority of low paid employees only recourse to sick pay is through SSP, Statutory Sick Pay. This was another recurring theme of this conference and one seen before calling for action in the form of past motions. The hardship faced when illness happens is all too relevant in this sector. With the 1 in 5 people living with less than £100 in savings, pay check to pay check. Dropping from your full salary, albeit a low one, to SSP at less than £100 a week, does send workers into debt and additional costs, which can take months, if not longer to extricate themselves from.

Receiving Occupational Sick Pay, the pay you would have received as if you were working, is a priority for workers in the C&V area. Rightly it remains at the forefront of workers requests, and Unison needs to work harder with campaigning to see more employers implement occupational sick pay to effectively support employees from dropping into a spiral of debt.

Other motions covered familiar topics such as Young members in Community(1) Abolish workers being charged for their DBS check (5) and Supporting regional development in Community (13). This motion builds on the 2022 NDC motion which saw the 'Organising and Recruitment Strategy Development Project' begin. One possible outcome of this motion for the C&V in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere, is the development of 'Regional' C&V Branches.

Localised Branches would be prone failure, single point failure being an issue in small Branches, whereas large multi staffed Branches can get through these occasions. One 'called for' action was to be able to develop 'fully functioning structures (in the C&V) to participate in regional structures'. I believe this is essential and Regions should be looking at how to support and lead campaigns for members in a sector which is heavily 'serviced', rather than organised.

The most catching motion for me was 2 Fire and re-hire: Dismissal and re-engagement in Community, written and moved by the Community Service Group Executive. In my substantive role as Cambridgeshire County Branch Secretary. I recently supported a dozen members from a Housing Association who were being threatened with Fire and Re-hire, if they did not sign away their membership to the Local Government Pension Scheme LGPS. It was a long drawn out case, which ultimately saw their removal from the LGPS, but with a compensatory payment. That payment in no way recompensed them for the potential pension loss, estimated to between £5-7k per year throughout their retirement.

Fire and Re-hire needs to be challenged, not only by Branches but at Regional and of course National level. National needs to be getting significant agreement from Labour that they will institute legislation outlawing this practice immediately upon taking office. The Tory government promised action after the P&O issue, but we have seen no progress so far, which means that Labour will be our only promise of ending this barbaric practice.

All the motions were heard within the allotted time, so with no further business, conference was closed, and we could all make our journey home.

Solidarity