

Report from TUC Conference



Brighton 8 -11 September 2024

Distribution to:

Regional Council

All Eastern Region Unison Members.

Introduction:

This was the 156th TUC Conference, and the first that I have attended as the Eastern Regional Delegate. The Unison delegation was the biggest, with over 40 delegates from all the Regions and Nations, plus delegates from Committees and the NEC.

The TUC represents over 5 million working people, 1.3 million of those are Unison members! This figure covers the 48 member unions of the TUC. It is similar to Unison top structure, in that it has a President, who is appointed on an annual basis, this year it was Matt Wrack, the General Secretary of the FBU. More on the new President at the end of this report. The TUC General Secretary is Paul Nowak, a position he took up in 2022 after starting work for the TUC in 2000, coming from BIFU and also holding the General Secretary position of the Scottish TUC.

Sunday was an 'informal' late afternoon of meetings, getting to know other delegates and the routine of conference. It also 'agrees speakers' on the motions. This aspect is very different from any of the Unison conferences we all might attend, where you can write a speech. Or not in some cases, wait your turn and speak on any motion you like. TUC is a strictly managed affair, there are no opportunities to get up, every speaker is agreed well before the motion, and if time does not allow, even those who have permission to speak, may well be refused that opportunity to ensure conference runs to time.

Due to work commitments, the earliest I could arrive in Brighton was 1900hrs. meaning that I could not make the introductory meeting. I did however get to meet up with a few of my Unison comrades at the evening social, held by GFTU, the General Federation of Trade Unions, later that night.



Monday 9 September

The agenda is a crowded one, and with nearly 90 motions to get through in 3 days, you can understand why the speaker list is firmly under control. All 3 days of conference were a 0930 start, and it was necessary to extend every session to allow one more motion to be heard. Meaning that days 1 and 2, did not end until 1730.

The motions [All \(programme\) – TUC Congress Motions](#) were a mixture of what would and did quite happily sit in Unison's NDC, but also some that were job specific, roles which Unison do not cover and listening to these motions was most interesting, as despite the obvious differences, many of our issues stem from the same root cause. Funding, recruitment and retention, poor wages, degradation of terms and conditions.

As the day progressed, emails detailing composite motions were being received, this reduced the number of motions being heard, but not necessarily the speaker list, as even these composite motions were on occasions, kept to a mover and a seconder only.

TUC is heavily stage managed and you can't join a queue of speakers like you can at Unison's conferences.

After conference, the selection of fringe meetings is boggling. Many this year were on Palestine, but there were meetings on Energy, Cuba Social security, the New Deal and Irish Unity to name a few. I attended a Stop The War Coalition meeting and heard Fran Heathcote, PCS General Secretary, Maryam Eslamdoust, TSSA General Secretary, Alex Gordon, RMT President, Chris Nineham, Stop The War Vice Chair and the person responsible for organising the marches in London, (and others) as well as Unison President Steve North speak. It was a veritable who's who of speakers, and was informative and passionate on content.



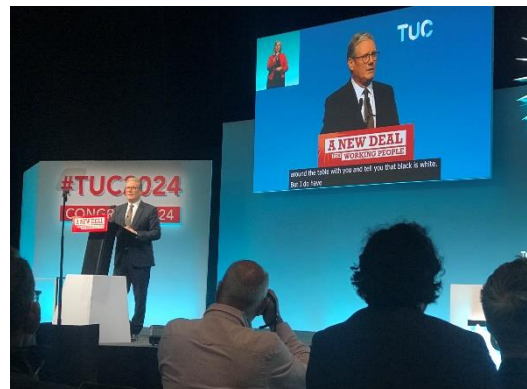
Unison President Steve North speaking at the Stop The War Coalition fringe.

One of the several messages we heard from speaker after speaker, was the list of atrocities we have seen committed in the Gaza strip, rape, torture, murder indiscriminate killings of children, over 16,500 have lost their lives.

The stopping of 30 of more than 300 arms contracts by Lammy does not go anywhere near far enough to end the war, which was described by one speaker, as 'it is not a war, it's akin to shooting fish in a barrel'.

Tuesday 10 September

The big day for conference, with the Prime Minister Kier Starmer making the keynote speech. The first time a Labour PM has spoke at TUC conference for over 15 years. The motions were rattled through, and then the PM joined the top table. Matt Wrack introduced the PM and so began a 20+ minute speech, which was interrupted at points with shouts of 'shame' and 'tax the rich'.



[Click on image to hear the full speech.](#)

The hall rapidly emptied at the end of this speech, most for the toilets or the bar! So much noise was being made, that the President had to ask for quiet so the next speaker could be heard.

The talk after the PM's speech was that it was not a strong speech for the public sector. The cost of rebuilding after 14 years of Tory mismanagement, it appears that the cost of this will remain on the public sector's shoulders to rebuild the economy.

No increase in pay, no additional funding for vulnerable children and adults. I know that seems hard to believe, but this is a Labour party that has already removed the winter fuel allowance from pensioners, and voted against getting rid of the cap on child benefits, which is keeping 1.6 million children in poverty.

Although the gloom of the scale of the debt that the country is in, the reality that things are not going to get better, as quick as we all had hoped. I do firmly believe that we as working people, will (somehow) be better off under a Labour government. Kier Starmer did get real applause when he spoke about the repeal the Trade Union Act 2016, getting rid of the minimum Services Act and a stop of the attacks on the trade union movement.

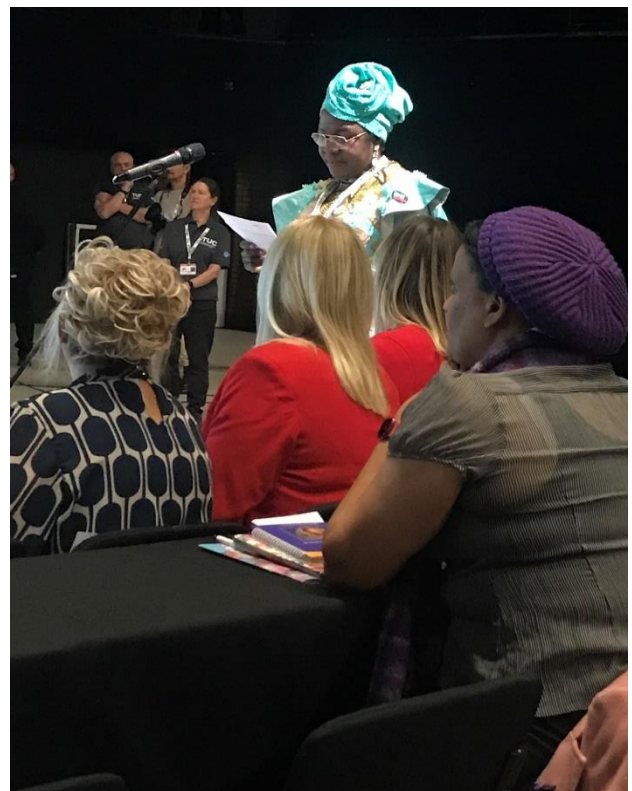
His comments on winning the election; 'This election would not have been won if we hadn't changed' did raise a few different opinions. I will leave you to discuss this point.

Kier did take some questions after his speech, all vetted by the TUC and introduced by Paul Nowak. This added a valuable addition of 14 minutes in the PM's presence.

The first question was from Unison Vice President; Julia Mwaluki. The question was on the Care Service

Q: Unison is supportive for the fair pay agreement for care workers, but can the PM reassert Labours commitment to a National care Service, and getting this up and running quicker?

A: The PM's response was that he knew about this, as his sister is a care worker in the NHS. Labour would commit to a NCS, and work alongside Unison's GS with a fair pay agreement in the Care sector first. He looked forward to delivering on this in the future. Let's hope it isn't long and pension reform is included.



Unison VP Julia Mwaluke.

The third question from Sonia was with regards to the School Support Staff Negotiating Body and its introduction. There is no doubt that the return of the SSSNB will be a welcome for school support colleagues, and the PM did not disappoint when he said that it would reintroduced in the coming months.

Wednesday 11 September

After a stormy day in conference and an even stormier night in Brighton, day 3 started with sunshine. Maybe brought on by the fact that conference had continued to move through the motions at breakneck speed, meaning that a short day and an early finish was highly likely, or the fact it was indeed a sunny start to the day. Either way conference got under way on time, sharp at 0930.



Unison AGS Liz Snape.

The composite and emergency motions began to come through. The motion on Palestine [C17 Palestine – TUC Congress Motions](#) despite our differences on School Support Staff membership, was a coming together of the National Education Union and Unison. We also had the Palestinian Ambassador, Dr Husam Zomlot. For those who also attended Unison NDC in June, Dr. Zomlot was also Unison’s NEC keynote speaker. Dr. Zomlot’s speech can be heard here: [Palestinian Ambassador, Dr Husam Zomlot's speech to Congress - 11 September 2024](#)

Others passed (all motions were passed) included the Climate Emergency, Violence Against Women and Girls and Stop the War in the Middle East, as well as Making Railways more Accessible.

Overall the experience of attending the 156th was highly positive. Meeting and mixing with delegates from other sectors was both interesting and uplifting at times. Hearing of the challenges and success's, reminded me of why Unison's NEC introduced the Organising to Win model, why the Industrial Action Committee (Via the NEC) uplifted strike payments and made them payable from day 1. Initiatives that other Trade Unions had already introduced.

These what might seem small changes, have taken Unison on a pathway where its members can now challenge the employer and make it a realistic opportunity that we can improve our T's & C's.

Other selected motions with a specific Unison interest:

[Motion 48 Standing up for care workers – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[C11 Public services – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[C12 Fair pay and terms and conditions for NHS staff – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 57 Freedom to speak up: protections for NHS whistleblowing – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 64 Education is the engine of national renewal – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[C13 An inclusive education system – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[C14 No excuse for abuse – protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of school staff – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 69 Health and safety in school buildings – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[C01 End of the hostile environment towards workers and unions – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 05 Migrant workers' rights – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 45 Inclusivity in maternity services – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 61 Time to bring an end to unpaid overtime in Cafcass – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[C03 Miscarriage leave – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 10 Childcare – TUC Congress Motions](#)

[Motion 39 Fighting the far-right narrative, hate crimes and hate speech to defend LGBT+ rights – TUC Congress Motions](#)

Rob Turner: TUC 2024 Delegate