

Britain Labour - Unison conference 2023: a left consolidated

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UNISON conference in Liverpool in June 2023 was not as bad as last year's (see the reports here). Then there was a concerted move by some elements within the union to dislodge the left leadership of the NEC and even drive them out of the union. In the interim, the Time For Real Change left group managed to win 31 seats on the NEC (to the 29 of the right wing slate) and might have won more if not for some problems with paper work for some candidates.

Compared to 2022, UNISON conference 2023 was a more sedate affair. Some skirmishes on a few motions but nothing too substantial. The main fight was over a proposal by the NEC to cap branch reserves and take the rest for the national strike fund. This proposal would have boosted the strike fund by millions of pounds (some UNISON branches are sitting on vast reserves of money) whilst still leaving the richer branches with a lot of cash in the bank account.

After a heated debate in which opposing delegates accused the NEC of a 'smash and grab' of branch funding (the phrase was repeated so often it reminded some of us of 'there's no magic money tree' from the 2017 General Election!) it went to a card vote which narrowly lost, only 9,000 votes in it.

This was a shame but it did reveal to a lot of wavering delegates that the only thing the right can muster is cynical opposition. There were no positive motions from their wing of the union, nothing serious about strategy or fighting the Tories.

This was revealed most clearly in the debate over a Composite motion which Standing Orders insisted was counterposed to the NEC motion on strike strategy. This was a political manoeuvre. The motions were clearly not counterposed but some people wanted to see the NEC motion defeated to put the leadership on the backfoot. The substance of the motions was either to empower the NEC to make decisions over strike strategy and tactics or to set up some kind of review or working group that would report back at some later date to investigate the possibility of how we might something or other. The Composite motion was defeated and the NEC motion passed which was a good indication of some fighting spirit amongst the delegates.

The good news after conference is that the left won the presidential team for the next two years and can still push for more necessary change from the NEC. Some on the left were concerned about a vicious witch hunt against the left if the delicate balance of forces on the NEC went to the right. That would have meant a lot of good UNISON activists being kicked out and potentially whole branches shut down. It's happened before in UNISON.

If people are unclear about the differences between the left of the union around Time For Real Change and their opponents it is simply this - some of us in the union want a fighting class struggle union that uses its considerable industrial muscle in important sectors like Health and Local

Government to leverage much better deals for our members and take on the Tory agenda to undermine the public sector.

For too long UNISON was a 'service model' union, cheap car insurance and dental plans, a union that was happy to push below inflation pay deals and expel militants who opposed the cosy consensus with bosses. Now we are shifting the union, gradually and bit by bit, in a new direction. It is a huge endeavour as it means unravelling 30 years of congealed bureaucratic entrenchment so it cannot happen overnight but it is happening.

And it needs to happen. Public sector workers are using food banks whilst the world careers towards climate disaster. Something must give. And as one of the biggest unions in the world, UNISON has a crucial role to play in the fight back.

A Unison activist

P.S.

• Anti*capitalist Resistance. 06 July 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/unison-conference-2023-a-left-consolidated/>