

Notes from National Women's Committee 2017, 16-18 February, Brighton Conference Centre

Conference was chaired for the second year in a row by a Scottish delegate, this time Davina Rankin. Conference saw a total of 36 Motions and 7 Emergency Motions being debated and all business was concluded.

There were a wide range of speakers and motions, and some of the highlights for me were:

Paula Donovan, AIDS Free World, UN Adviser

She spoke on the current AIDS crisis and on the issue of child marriage (and the links between the two). She said that in sub-Saharan Africa, 1 in 9 girls were married before the age of 15. She spoke on the on-going debates around child labour and child marriage and the myriad of definitions used to try to cloud the issue. However it is illegal to marry a child and constitutes statutory rape. Child marriage shares the same definition as child labour but these girls are not counted in the statistics. The ILO response was that that was the way the system works and it 'can't be changed'. There is supposed to be a tripartite agreement between employers/government/workers to work together to enforce the law on child marriage but its failing.

www.childmarriageischildlabour.org

Dave Prentice, General Secretary

Dave spoke around how we now find ourselves living in dangerous times – and we can only wonder about how Brexit will affect workers rights. He obviously spoke about Trump and said that UNISON had signed up to the Stop Trump UK Campaign, and has given a donation to help fund demonstrations. He spoke on UKIP and their links to Trump and the dangers that that poses. Pledged his support to the WASPI campaign (and once he managed to get into the sash posed for a photo with the WASPI women).

He also pledged support to the Derby and Durham teaching support staff/assistants who have seen their salaries cut by up to £400pm.

He encouraged everyone to attend the demonstrations planned for March – *Its our NHS* and *March against Racism*.

Angela Raynor, Shadow Education Minister

Angela gave an inspiring talk about how her life and what the TU movement had enabled her to do. She became a young mum at 16, and at that point gave up on her education she had a couple of attempts to get back into it before becoming involved in the TU and getting support and encouragement to study for her degree, and now working as an MP. She spoke about being proud to be able to give something back and the fact that she hoped she was a role model for her son. She encouraged women to get involved and grasp opportunities and make their voices heard.

Health Sector Service Group meeting

It was disappointing that yet again this meeting was England centric. There was very little mentioned about the devolved nations.

Emergency Motion 7 – The election of Donald Trump and its implications for Women’s Rights on a global scale – Scottish Women’s Committee

As you can imagine this Motion had a lot of debate – a one sided debate albeit! Despite his best endeavours to railroad his schemes and Executive Orders through, there is a growing backlash against his policy. Conference were heartened at the global mobilisation showing distain at his plans – ie. reinstating the Global Gag Rule (also known as the Mexican City Policy) he has now made it impossible for NGOs to give information on sexual health issue or abortion advice in Africa and Central/South America or funding is withdrawn. There is even talk that it could go beyond ‘family planning advice’ and impact on those providing disease control interventions also.

Noted that the NY taxi drivers strike around the airport which served to ‘hem’ him in. Spoke of need to stop his visit to UK, and if he does come then we need to be out there demonstrating. It was a passionate debate and it came as no surprise that it was passed unanimously!

Motion 28 – Modern slavery – closer than you think – Yorkshire and Humberside

A very emotive, and at times uncomfortable, subject. The motion spoke to the fact that there is no set ‘type’ of person affected by this – it is not longer just women and children from minorities or excluded groups in some far off country – it’s here on our doorsteps and includes our young women and children as well. The rise in live-in workers is also a cause for concern and that there is often little protection for these women.

There was the usual mix of topics for motions and fringe meetings and overall it was a really good conference, and the vote of thanks to the chair was quite emotive – it was given by Elizabeth Rankin, Davena’s mum.

Happy to chat about motions etc if anyone has any Qs.

Viv Thomson
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