

NEC Meeting 7th September 2004

This is a personal account of the meeting. This is not a comprehensive or official report, but highlights issues that may be of particular interest.

Wembley Stadium

The early part of the meeting was dominated by discussion of the Wembley steel erectors' dispute.

Colleagues may have heard of this important dispute, at the prestigious Wembley Stadium project, in which national conditions (the 'Blue Book' in Construction) were under threat. The dispute was successfully resolved last week, following negotiations between Amicus and GMB officials and management. National conditions have been retained, and all the members involved will all return to work.

The background to the dispute is complex. Around 240 steel erectors – split between Amicus and the GMB – were put under pressure to work compulsory overtime (a 66 hour week with compulsory weekend working), and were told that the traditional 'last in first out' system for redundancies would be replaced by a points system. They refused to do this, negotiations broke down, and the workforce was dismissed. They then mounted a picket line outside the workplace, and also sought moral and financial support from across the trade union movement. Amicus repudiated the dispute following legal advice; the GMB did not.

A large contingent of Amicus members involved in the dispute lobbied the NEC meeting asking for support. A delegation of members met Derek Simpson and a delegation of NEC members. The NEC voted to repudiate the dispute, on the advice of the General Secretary and the Union solicitor. Five NEC members voted against this position and two abstained. (I voted against repudiation of the dispute).

Regional Councils

Another major item of debate was around Regional Councils, and their role in the merged union. The General Purposes and Finance Committee (GPFC) had met on 20th July to consider how the Regional Councils fitted into the constitutional structure.

Requests from several Regional Councils to make donations had generally been approved by the GPFC, and these decisions were confirmed by the NEC. These included donations to the NE Pensioners association, Wortley Hall, the South Yorkshire Festival, the William Cook Hardship Fund, Manchester Pride, and others.

The GPFC recommended that the NEC turn down many other requests that raised issues about the future role of Regional Councils. These included requests that the Management Committee should be increased to include posts of Organising and Recruitment, and Publicity and Campaigns (from London Region). The GPFC view was that the Union's organising and recruitment effort were delivered by a regional network of organisers, and that publicity and campaigns were national issues best conducted centrally through the

Union's staff based at King Street. A similar request from the East Midlands to extend the Management Committee was rejected.

Other requests that were not approved by the GPFC included that the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Committees should meet four times a year (received from Yorkshire, London and the North West); that Regional Councils should be allowed to affiliate to the European Social Forum (London and South East); that Regional Councils should be able to review branch structure (London, South West); and that visitors should be allowed at Regional Council meetings (London).

At the request of the London Region Management Committee, I moved resolutions to seek to reverse several of these decisions. Several speakers argued that the rule book should be permissive rather than prescriptive, that centralised control was undesirable, and that we should seek to involve lay activists wherever we could.

The resolutions were defeated, and the NEC upheld the recommendations of the GPFC.

Whitehall College

NEC members were told of a report to the GPFC outlining a £1.5 M cost required to repair and upgrade buildings and facilities. In particular, there were serious health and safety concerns, including inadequate fire precautions. It was reported that the health and safety failings left no alternative to the (temporary) closure of Whitehall to residential courses.

Points were made in the discussion that with a growing membership we needed more educational facilities, not less; that the cost was significant but so would be the cost of acquiring or refurbishing any new premises; and that no final decision on the future of Whitehall College could be taken.

Whitehall is now 'mothballed', but could in principle be re-opened.

Branch Funds

The GPFC has recommended that meeting room costs will be met to a maximum of £200 a year, and incidental postage costs (rather than general mailings to members) to a maximum of £50 a year. The NEC was also advised that local affiliations by branches would need to be approved centrally.

There was a brief discussion on branch funds. There was concern expressed that the suggested finance would not cover branch costs, and that local affiliations should not be subject to central approval.

My recollection (and that of another NEC member I've spoken to) is that no final decisions on this were taken, as the issue was 'rolled over' to the next meeting. Other NEC reports that have been circulated suggest the guidance was approved.

Other Issues

A lot of business was not covered, owing to the time spent discussing the Wembley Stadium dispute.

It is likely that a future review of branches will lead to a sharp reduction in the number of branches (with a figure of 500 being suggested).

A member of Unifi has made a complaint to the Certification Officer about the merger process. This was due to be heard on 10th September. A technical hitch meant that the merger with the GPMU might be delayed.

Lucy Kelly was confirmed as Deputy General Secretary (with a number of NEC members calling for a more open recruitment process).

A written finance report was given to NEC members, and will be discussed at the next NEC meeting.

Gill George