

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.

This was the first meeting since Unifi and the GPMU joined Amicus. They are now represented on the NEC, and interim arrangements were agreed for representation in the regional and national structures of Amicus.

Role of NEC Members

The General Purposes and Finance Committee proposed a change to NEC Standing Orders that would prevent any NEC member from making any statement or taking any action which would be likely to have the effect of undermining or repudiating an NEC decision. Several NEC members raised concerns about this. Assurances were given that this would not prevent NEC members from reporting to members, and outlining key arguments and the way they had voted themselves. It was also agreed that this proposal would not restrict the freedom of NEC members while 'wearing other hats' in the union (e.g. if an NEC member also happened to be a Branch Secretary). The change was agreed subject to these assurances.

General Secretary's Report

The General Secretary's report, and the discussion arising from this, made up a large part of the meeting. This was a wide ranging report, covering administration and financial issues, administration, member benefits, and a proposed branch reorganisation.

Administration and Membership Benefits

There are proposals to enhance administration – e.g. by providing better computer systems, enabling membership forms to be scanned in and processed immediately, and sending new members immediate confirmation that they have joined. Members will have access to a local rate telephone number that will provide a 24 hour information and advice service. Personnel policies and training will also be overhauled.

Other proposed membership benefits include a lottery (previously run by Unifi), and an internet jobs board. The previous constituent unions all offered broadly similar benefits (car insurance, credit cards, personal insurance etc) but with different providers. Where possible, these will be consolidated. Products will only be offered to members if there is felt to be a genuine benefit (e.g. a reduction in cost or a better service). The intention is that providers will be expected to adhere to a set of ethical principles, such as trade union recognition.

Finance (and associated reorganisation)

The initial 2004 budget showed a significant deficit. Steps were taken to address this, primarily through a voluntary redundancy programme. This added to costs in 2004, but with long term savings on staff costs in future years. The initial draft budget for 2005 again showed a deficit. The report from the GPFC recommended a reduction in staff costs, with an associated reduction in property costs. This will be achieved through the reopening of the voluntary redundancy scheme, but with no compulsory redundancies.

A central objective for the union has to be to balance expenditure with subscription costs. The union is undergoing a great deal of organisational change, and a part of this needs to be a reduction in ongoing costs while safeguarding benefits to members.

The proposals around administration, finance and reorganisation were not contentious, and were approved by the NEC.

Branch Reorganisation

Proposals around branch reorganisation were much more controversial, and led to a lengthy and sometimes heated debate.

NEC members had been circulated with a paper on branch reorganisation, prepared by the Senior Management Team. The document proposed a reduction in the number of branches from 1800 to 500, with a target membership of around 2000 members. The intention was that most branches should be organised on a geographical rather than an industrial basis, integrating members from the former constituent unions, and giving branches a primary role of linking with the local community. Members would be allocated to branches on the basis of home address. New members could start being allocated to the branch closest to their home address immediately. When a branch reached the stage where it could be regarded as an 'Amicus branch' (i.e. a large cross-industry branch), it would be provided with better IT backup to facilitate communication between branch secretaries and contact points in the union.

This would be a major change for reps and activists in the Health sector, as most of our members are currently organised into Health branches.

Many NEC members expressed significant disagreements with the proposals. Most had no objection to a review of branches, but felt that this was the wrong way to go about it. The three Health Sector members talked about a number of Health issues – the need for reps and activists to share information across workplaces e.g. with Agenda for Change, the particular implications for members in PCTS (where our membership is typically smaller and more fragmented), and the way this would pre-empt the review of the CPHVA and other groups and associations. We also talked about the need for consultation before members began to be allocated to branches by home address, and asked where the figure of 500 branches had come from (as this was far fewer branches than the other three of the 'Big Four' unions).

Other NEC members stressed the need for consultation, that a 'one size fits all' approach did not work with such a diverse membership, that smaller sections of the union would disappear, that the starting point for members in attending branch meetings was to discuss workplace organisation, and that we couldn't agree in advance to specific target numbers for branches. There was concern that the proposals were against rule.

The General Secretary replied, saying that 500 branches was a good number for computer systems. This was a goal, not an arbitrary pattern for every branch to squeeze into – but we already had an industrial structure for industrial issues. The proposals didn't exclude industrial branches but put a framework in place. This wasn't a way of getting rid of activists, who were the life blood of the union, but branches were not relevant to

members. There wouldn't be a change unless there was a sharp edge to it. New activists would prefer the new model of branch.

The vote eventually taken was that the document will go back to the Senior Management Team for redrafting, to take on board the comments from NEC members. It was agreed that, for now, members will continue to be allocated to branches as currently specified in the rulebook (where allocation is to an appropriate industrial branch where one exists). The NEC voted unanimously for this position. The revised document will return to the NEC early next year.

Policy and Rules Amendments

The NEC will agree its own policy motions and rule amendments at its meeting in January. These will go forward to the Policy Conference in May. If members have ideas around particularly important issues that may not already be on the agenda, please let me know.

Agenda for Change

The General Secretary reported on the Agenda for Change ballot. He said that although there had been a majority for Agenda for Change, it was not a very great majority. The turnout had been high. Members still had major concerns that needed to be addressed. He also commented on the technical problems with the ballot, where members from the former AEEU had not initially received ballot papers. This had been rectified as soon as the mistake had been realised.

One of the Health Sector NEC members commented that some members stood to lose money, and a few of them stood to lose a great deal of money. He asked for the NEC to ensure that sufficient resources were allocated to the Health Sector while Agenda for Change is implemented.

Correspondence

Motions opposing the renewal of Trident and the war in Iraq were referred back to the originating branches for redrafting. Motions that were agreed were: liaison with the Parliamentary Committee to strengthen health and safety and corporate manslaughter legislation; that contracts for the new Eurostar trains should be retained in the UK; that London Underground trains should continue to be maintained by Metronet, protecting the jobs of Amicus members; that the union should campaign for investment in the infrastructure of the docks and transport systems to support the steel industry; that members in the CMA should not be expected to spy on fellow workers in the Royal Mail; and that Amicus should continue to support Apprenticeship schemes to ensure a future for manufacturing.

Gill George
20th December 2004