

## Report of NEC Meeting 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> January 2005

*This is not an official or comprehensive report, but picks out issues that may be of particular interest to members in Health.*

*This report is written under new guidelines for all NEC members on collective responsibility. Like other NEC members, I am now allowed to outline my own position in debates or votes only if I am specifically asked about my personal position.*

*I welcome questions on my personal position from members. Please feel free to contact me by phone: 020 7502 6905 (home) or by e-mail: [gill@ghg.me.uk](mailto:gill@ghg.me.uk)*

This was an important meeting, as it agreed NEC recommendations on the rule amendments and policy resolutions going forward to the Amicus Policy and Rules Conferences in May. The important General Purposes and Finance Committee (GPFC) had met and agreed its own recommendations before the NEC meeting, so discussion tended to focus on agreement or disagreement with the GPFC position. The amount of discussion on individual issues varied enormously. In many of the votes, some NEC members voted against the GPFC recommendation.

### Rule Amendments

One group of rule amendments looked at ways for members on lower salaries having a reduced contribution rate. This group included a rule amendment from the Health Sector, and one from the Women's Conference. The GPFC recommendation was to oppose all of the amendments for reduced subscription rates, as it was felt this could cost the union money (e.g. a £2.5 million loss if this applied to 50,000 members). Points raised in the debate were that many people may not join in the first place because they cannot afford to, and that reduced subs for lower paid members could therefore increase membership and increase subscription income. Lower subs could open up possibilities for a recruitment drive, and we should not look at this just on existing membership. Several NEC members spoke in this debate. The NEC voted to support the GPFC recommendation (i.e. against reduced subs for members on low pay).

It was agreed that members in dispute (and therefore exempt from contributions) for over 2 years would not be transferred to the retired members category.

A proposal to remove age restrictions on lay activity was opposed by the GPFC. An NEC member argued that it was wrong to discriminate against members on the grounds of age, especially as changes to pensions made it increasingly likely that members would have to work beyond 65 years. The Amicus lawyer (Georgina Hirsch) said that the existing rule that restricts participation on members aged over 65 and over 70 was not illegal. The NEC voted to support the GPFC recommendation (i.e. against the rule change).

A group of rule amendments dealt with equalities. Broadly similar amendments from the LGBT Members Committee, the Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee, the Disabled Members Conference, and the Young Members Conference called for regional forums or committees to be allowed to meet four times a year, instead of once every two years. An amendment from the Womens Conference sought to increase representation at Women's Conference, to make the Women's Conference annual, and to allow women to continue to hold elected positions in the women's structure if they cease to become a rep (e.g. when

they go on maternity leave). The GPFC position was that these should be remitted in favour of an NEC paper on equalities, and should be opposed if the submitting bodies did not agree to remit.

There was a fair amount of debate around this, with strong views expressed on both sides. It was argued that the NEC allows Regional Councils to request additional equalities forums anyway - but it was also pointed out that every request for additional meetings has been turned down by the NEC. There was concern that the NEC would be going to Conference setting itself against all the equalities groups in the Union, and that we should not remit in the absence of the NEC paper. Others felt that the equalities proposals would undermine lay democracy based on workplace reps, and that it was wrong to have this many meetings. The eventual vote was to ask relevant full time officers to work with three NEC members to draft the NEC paper on equalities, but to ask the submitting bodies to remit all of the rule amendments (and to oppose the amendments if they do not).

The language used in the debate caused offence to some NEC members. A previous Unifi Executive member read out a strongly worded statement the following day stressing the need for NEC members to lead by example on equalities issues.

A proposal to allow branches to occasionally change the meeting time or place or frequency of meetings without prior permission from the Regional Council was opposed by the GPFC as this would make it more difficult for members. Several NEC members argued that this would not make things more difficult for members, that branch activists arranged meetings to maximise attendance, and that issues came up that made it useful to sometimes change meetings. Others were concerned that meetings would be changed 'willy nilly' or that an ability to change meeting times would lead to political manoeuvring (e.g. a change in time to allow for nomination of particular candidates for NEC elections). The NEC voted to support the GPFC recommendation.

Proposals to increase branch General Purposes income or expenditure from 3% to 5% of subscription income (the level that applied in MSF) were opposed by the GPFC. This was on the grounds of cost. The NEC endorsed the GPFC recommendation, with relatively little opposition.

Rule amendments to increase the size of Regional Councils, changing the balance of delegates from 25% branches, 75% industrial sectors to 50/50, and making it harder for the NEC to withhold approval of Regional Council plans and budgets were opposed by the GPFC. One of the proposals in this group was from the Health Sector National Committee. The arguments in favour of the amending the rules were around trusting lay activists, recognising the valuable work done by Regional Councils around e.g. recruitment and organising, and the need to mainstream equalities issues into the general work of the union. Arguments against included that Regional Councils in MSF had been dominated by retired members, that we were a union about work and people at work, and that there was no evidence of it being harder for women, gay or black activists to become workplace reps. The GPFC view was that it would increase costs, and would undermine the '25/75%' split. The NEC endorsed the GPFC recommendation to oppose the rule amendment.

A proposal to create District Committees, with delegates elected from branches, and powers and responsibilities delegated by the Regional Council, was opposed by the GPFC and

NEC. An alternative proposal from the GPFC, for area committees without funding or decision making powers, was supported.

The NEC agreed a rule change that the President of Conference would not be elected from the floor of Conference. Conference will now automatically be chaired by the Chair of the NEC. There was concern expressed that delegates to Conference would be unhappy about this, but the NEC agreed the rule change.

A long debate took place on the election of full time officers. The GPFC made no recommendation on this. Arguments in favour were primarily around direct accountability, and creating a much closer link between members on the ground and the officers who represent them. NEC members with direct experience of electing full time officers reported that the system worked well. Arguments against included opposition to short term contracts, concern that good candidates could be excluded, that there would be an in-built advantage for candidates from large workplaces, and that it would be difficult for officers to implement unpopular NEC decisions. The vote – very narrowly – was to support the election of officers. A second vote was to support election of future rather than existing officers, with most of the detail around the proposals to be decided in the future by the NEC.

There was support for a proposal that the Rules Conference will be every four years, rather than every six years. There was also support for a proposal that branches would be allowed to make donations to industrial disputes, subject to strict guidelines that will be agreed by the NEC.

A proposal from the three Health Sector NEC members to allow regional OACs was viewed by the GPFC as unnecessary. A request to deal with this in an alternative way by discussing it under 'Any Other Business' was declined by the Chair. After some quite sharp debate, the amendment was withdrawn.

### Policy Motions

On most policy motions, there was minimal debate. Most motions have been grouped into composites, and the GPFC recommended support for the bulk of these. The NEC will be supporting composite motions on e.g. manufacturing, to campaign for a 35 hour working week, on employment rights, equal rights legislation, on pensions (including an amendment from Health), opposition to the BNP, opposition to the vilification of asylum seekers and many others. I am happy to provide copies of these on request.

The GPFC asked for remittance of a composite motion on privatisation. This included the motion from Health opposing privatisation. An NEC member expressed concern about this, in view of the importance of the issue to members. The NEC will put forward its own proposal on privatisation, although it is likely that the GPFC will oppose the renationalisation of public services that have already been privatised.

A request from the Local Authorities Sector Committee to substitute a motion opposing privatisation for an earlier one on TUPE was rejected, primarily on the procedural grounds that other bodies are unable to amend a substituted motion. Again, the NEC will put forward its own proposal, but it is unclear if this will deal with the privatisation of council jobs raised in the Local Authorities motion.

After a short debate, the NEC voted overwhelmingly to support an early UK entry into the Euro. Speakers against this raised concerns about changing our current position of neutrality, and that entry criteria would demand strict controls on public spending.

A short debate took place on a motion calling for opposition to the war on terror and attacks on civil liberties, and calling for affiliation to the Stop the War Coalition. The GPFC position was to oppose the motion unless it was amended by an amendment that fundamentally changed the content. The argument was put that the 'Big Four' unions (of which Amicus is one) have reached an understanding with Labour about the withdrawal of troops from Iraq when possible, and that it was wrong to undermine the Labour Government in the run up to a General Election. Two NEC members outlined an alternative view: that the war in Iraq was built on a lie, that occupation was leading to a spiralling number of Iraqi (and UK and US) deaths, that the occupation by British and American troops increased violence, and that the elections were a sham. It was wrong to automatically support a Labour Government. The vote was to endorse the GPFC position (i.e. to amend the motion).

A motion from two NEC members called for the decommissioning of Trident and opposition to future nuclear weapons systems while seeking to protect members' jobs through diversification. This was opposed by the GPFC and the NEC as a whole, on the grounds that there could be a risk to members' jobs, and the motion could be seen as calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament.

*Most of the rule amendments and policy motions now go forward to the Amicus Policy and Rules Conferences in May. While the NEC recommendations are important, it is delegates to Conference who take a final decision.*

**Gill George**  
**6<sup>th</sup> February 2005**