

Report of NEC Meeting 2nd February 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

There was NO discussion on proposals for branch reorganisation and the possible change from industrial to geographical branches. However, the issue has not gone away, and will come back to the NEC in the future.

The General Purposes and Finance Committee (GPFC) recommended a paper on lay expenses and honoraria. This clarifies that lay members cannot claim £25 overnight expenses and a £5 for lunch and £10 for an evening meal allowance. The £25 will be paid for national conferences and committees and weekend schools which involve an authorised overnight stay, but not for education courses. The paper was agreed. As part of this discussion, an NEC member raised an item of correspondence from the CPHVA which indicated that members were still finding it difficult to claim childcare expenses. The expenses form and the guidance notes still make no reference to childcare expenses, and claims are sometimes being turned down. No clear position on childcare expenses had yet been established. The GPFC recommendation was to seek clarification from the CPHVA. The GPFC position was endorsed.

It was agreed that Amicus could provide legal representation for industrial diseases diagnosed after a member had left the union (as diseases such as mesothelioma may emerge many years later).

One candidate (Leonie Cooper) has withdrawn from the election for two women's representatives on the NEC, leaving Lorene Fabian, Margaret Lawson, Jane Stewart and Anne Trafford as the candidates for the two seats.

It was confirmed that branch fund allocations for the first quarter of 2005 have been calculated and will be sent to branches imminently. Michael Cardell, the Director of Finance, reported that branches had £600,000 in their bank accounts, but the quarter's allocation was only £200,000. The recommendation was therefore for the further withdrawal of funds from branches where the amount left in accounts at the end of 2004 was greater than the financial allocation for the quarter. Several NEC members expressed a high level of concern regarding this, arguing that this quarter's payments were being made late (and some branches had been left unable to function in January), that branches had received no indication that money would be taken from them, this was not a requirement under rule, and we seemed to be setting ourselves up for an unnecessary fight with branches. The recommendation to remove further funds from branches was endorsed by 31 votes to 9.

Concerns were expressed about the difficulty that branches are having with letters and resolutions not being acknowledged or dealt with. The General Secretary made a commitment to resolve these problems.

An emergency motion in support of members facing redundancy at Westland Helicopters was agreed unanimously.

A brief report on organising and industrial matters highlighted that although the 'old' Amicus had recruited 72,000 members in 2004, the net growth was only 13,700 – highlighting the considerable losses in members in some areas. The Senior Management Team will start to look at the question of organising more closely.

Amicus has launched a General Election campaign for the re-election of the Labour Government. The campaign includes regional political meetings, an Amicus guide to the 'Warwick agreement' and a booklet on 300 things that the Labour Government has done. There will also be a toolkit for activists wishing to campaign for the Labour Party.

A brief report was given on an apparent breakdown in the relationship between the CMA and Amicus as the 'parent union'. Georgina Hirsch, the union's lawyer, suggested that NEC members might need to be indemnified against personal liability in the event of the CMA taking action against the NEC for financial losses. The CMA has taken a case to the Certification Officer arguing that Amicus has acted wrongly in taking control of its finances, and may be pursuing additional legal action. The GPFC is drafting a proposal for the CMA to become an ordinary sector of the union rather than a semi-autonomous group. Several NEC members felt that further discussion was necessary, and that there was no clear explanation of why relations had broken down to this extent, or what the possible gains or losses to the union were of the course being taken. Others felt that as this was a legal matter it was best not to discuss it further, and this was the view that prevailed.

A new Amicus website has now gone live. Members will be able to set up a 'My Amicus' page, personalising the content. Amicus will be making a film for the General Election, featuring Derek Simpson and Patrick Stewart (of Star Trek fame).

A campaign pack on the attack on public sector pensions has been completed, and will be sent to workplace reps asap.

The major discussion of the meeting was on proposals to merge with the TGWU, and probably with the GMB. NEC members had not been advised of this prior to the meeting (although many knew of it from reports in the press). GPFC members had been told officially about the proposals for merger at 8am that morning.

General Secretary Derek Simpson introduced the topic. This is a summarised account of a long speech. Derek said that we lived in an age of globalisation, with the decline of customary industries such as manufacturing, and of former growth areas (with the off shoring of finance, call centres etc). Jobs are disappearing. We can recruit, but there are closures and redundancies, and the truth is that we will lose members. Globalisation means that the areas where we can have an effect are shrinking. Members want to know how can the union affect my job, my pay, my standard of living, but there is increased pressure on our negotiators and activists. Employers now deal internationally, and unions within one country can't deal with international employers. Unions have to consolidate their influence

on government. We can't expect the TUC to be as focused as an individual union can. To have the necessary influence with government we need an organisation bigger than Amicus or Unison. Size matters. We can recruit but we lose as many members as we recruit. We need growth through merger. With 2.5 million members, we would have tremendous political clout and can stand shoulder to shoulder with European unions. Tony Woodley will recommend to his Executive entering into merger talks with Amicus, and will write to Curran inviting him to join. I bring exactly that recommendation to you....

Some NEC members expressed concern, and sometimes did so with real passion. There was disappointment that NEC members had not been told of the merger in advance. One NEC member commented on reports that even the timetable for the merger had been decided before the NEC knew about it. NEC members wanted members to be consulted. We were still dealing with all the issues arising from the last round of mergers. There were concerns that in a union with an emphasis on a powerful General Secretary doing things on behalf of members, we would lose sight of the need to build collective organisation and a union that could be influenced by members. Lay control was important. There were implications for the future existence of the TUC, and for smaller unions. What would be the position of public sector members in a giant private sector union. An open discussion should take place before any decision was taken. Over the last 12 months any NEC member who asked a question or raised a challenge was rounded on. Correspondence disappears into a black hole, and when it is brought to the NEC it's treated as a matter of annoyance. It was OK to take the time to reflect on things, and we shouldn't take a decision based on ideology without substance.

A larger number of NEC members agreed with the position outlined by the General Secretary. Speakers said this was an exciting time, and a vision we could buy into. One NEC member had been excited and thrilled to read press reports of the merger. Members will be served by a stronger union. We've always been divided, and this is an opportunity to put divisions behind us. History shows that the gains of mergers outweigh problems. This is an opportunity we have to grasp. Our strength and vision have to emerge. The time is now. We have to take the first step, we can't consult on a theory.

Summing up, Derek indicated that this would be the start of a process of mergers. The PCS could move over to Unison, and other unions would come in with us. We would work in tandem with Unison. In the future we might have one union, not one big private and one big public union.

The vote was that the Amicus NEC was in principle in favour of pursuing a three way merger with the TGWU and the GMB, and authorised the General Secretary to pursue merger talks with the TGWU and to write to Kevin Curran asking him to join the talks. Three NEC members voted against this position, and asked for their votes to be recorded. The vote was overwhelmingly in favour of pursuing the mergers. It was reported that the TGWU Executive had voted unanimously in favour of merger talks earlier in the day.

Gill George
6th February 2005