

Report of NEC Meeting 15th and 16th November 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 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

Finance Report

A more detailed than usual finance report was given, and the audited accounts for the year ending December 2004 were presented. There was a brief discussion on whether the NEC was adequately fulfilling its legal responsibilities to keep proper accounting records and maintain control over the financial records of the union. Contribution income for 2004 was lower than expected. Staff costs were slightly up, but against the backdrop of a VR programme aimed at reducing staff costs on a long-term basis. Some costs for 2004 were lower than the previous year – reduced conference costs, and reduced election costs. The auditor's comment was that this was an asset rich union, but it had to live within its means in order to survive.

An NEC member asked about political fund expenditure, and why the non-affiliated political fund (e.g. for the CPHVA) was not shown separately. The General Secretary reported that there is no non-affiliated political fund.

For the current year, the year-end outcome is predicted to be for a deficit in line with the revised budget. The programme of reducing employment and property costs continues. Regional council and branch spending is below budget.

Subscription rates will rise to £9.75 a month next year.

'Ball park' figures were given for next year's budget. Reduced regional council and branch expenditure is anticipated to continue into next year. The budget was noted, and a more detailed budget will be presented to the next NEC.

Quite a long debate took place on staff and officer pension schemes. Deputy General Secretary Ed Sweeney put a proposal to the NEC to cut costs by harmonising pension arrangements, with in many cases an increased retirement age or increased contributions. The pension schemes were reported to be £55 million in deficit. Some NEC members expressed concern that no detailed actuarial report had been placed before the NEC, so that it was hard to know the true financial picture of schemes or the financial impact of different options. The valuations of schemes dated back in some cases to 2000. The lack of protection for existing scheme members was particularly concerning, as this was worse than the deal we'd got for our own members in the NHS, and protection might be a cost effective option. Ed Sweeney said that the Trustees of the schemes recognised the difficulties. Derek Simpson said that as trade unionists we would oppose any detriment, but this was the job of the Trustees - the NEC had to look to the good governance of the union. The report was approved with a handful of abstentions.

Organising Report

In the 12 months up to May 2005, we recruited over 70,000 new members – but the net figure was considerably less. The comment from Assistant General Secretary Paul Talbot was that ‘we had to raise our game’. The NEC endorsed an ‘Organising for Growth’ strategy which aims to create sustainable workplace organisation. This will be piloted in five regions this year, and continue nationally into next year. Every officer will identify two workplaces where the membership can be grown, and involve workplace reps/stewards in the plans. The Education Department will look at running regional organising courses for lay reps. Regional Councils will be asked to assist the programme.

Sadly, there was insufficient time for a serious discussion of an important initiative.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

These were discussed on the second day of the NEC, as the emphasis on the first day was on financial matters.

There was concern that although the NEC had approved an increase in contributions, members had not been notified of this.

An NEC member raised the issue of child care expenses, saying that she was raising it mainly so that she could raise it again under matters arising at the next NEC meeting. It was reported that Siobhan Endean, new Head of Equalities, was working on a child care policy.

Rolls Royce

Jerry Hicks, sacked convenor, reported on the aftermath of the dispute. He has lost his job for defending members. He reported that union organisation had not been crushed, and thanked the union barrister, and members who had organised a national levy. He was concerned about some problems, such as the difficulty getting an Amicus speaker to a public meeting, and wondered if the outcome might have been different if the General Secretary had been more prominent in his support for the dispute. He wondered if the merger, giving us two million members and over 300 MPs, would have affected the outcome, and thought this was worthy of debate. He called for a campaign against the anti-union laws that had led to the loss of his job. It was a waste of the experience if the union didn’t learn and grow.

Suspensions

Several NEC members attempted to raise the issue of union employees having been suspended the day after the previous NEC meeting. This was raised both under the minutes and in a later discussion on the GPFC report. There was unhappiness that the NEC had not been told that staff were about to be suspended (although subsequent reports are that this information had been made available to the GPFC). The Chair and General Secretary felt that the matter had been dealt with by the previous NEC, and no discussion was necessary. Around ten NEC members voted against a call to move on with no discussion of the issues raised.

Gate Gourmet

A brief discussion took place on the Gate Gourmet dispute. The General Secretary felt that the dispute and its aftermath (the threats of dismissal of three BA baggage handlers, and a legal threat against the TGWU) showed we had to understand where we were with

employment law, and we would not prevail by throwing ourselves on the barricades. An NEC member felt that the only rights that trade unionists had in this country had been won by fighting for them. The Gate Gourmet dispute had come very close to winning because of the solidarity action. Sometimes it was right to break the law.

Union Charity

Janet Moir was agreed as Trustee of this body.

Health Sector Groups and Associations

National Officer Gail Cartmail gave a presentation of the proposals for reform of groups and associations within the Health Sector. The aims had been to encourage integration, streamline operations, and adopt a more cohesive and rational strategy without completely alienating the people concerned.

The proposals affect the CPHVA, the CHCC, the Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists, the HPA, the MPU, the MHNA and the SSHA. The proposed new structure, replacing a variety of existing structures, is for a National Professional Committee with a delegate from each region. This would encourage adoption of a common Amicus philosophy, remove a confusing mix of structures, and save the union at least £18,000.

Two NEC members raised concerns. There was grudging acceptance from members that the proposals were not as bad as they might be, but very little support. Some of these groups had already lost their profession-specific publications. There was a loss of autonomy. There was a perception amongst activists that the dual role of professional body and trade union was not well understood, and that the professional role was being gradually whittled away. The driver here was cost, but these were big groups in a growing sector, and a real asset to the union. There was stiff competition from RCN and Unison. One CPHVA SIG had already been lost because of lack of money, and was now funded by a charity. The changes were not welcomed by everybody.

Gail reported that she did not recognise this description. There had been careful consultation with national committees. There were thriving professional journals. She had just returned from a very successful CPHVA conference, where the benefits of being in a union of 1.2 million members were apparent to over 1000 people.

The proposal to reorganise Health Sector groups and associations was endorsed, with a handful of NEC members voting against.

Public Sector Pensions

Gail Cartmail also reported on public sector pensions. The outcome was that for our members in the NHS and MOD (covered by the civil service scheme) there was protection of benefits for *existing* scheme members, but the retirement age for a full pension would increase to 65 for new scheme members. There would still be guaranteed defined benefits, indexation, equality proofing, an aim to increase take up and flexibility of retirement age. This did not apply to local government members where talks were at a critical stage. This had been the best deal possible.

Several NEC members expressed concern. One said that our local government members were left to fight on their own, and this left them weaker. For the other schemes, it was fine for existing members but what about future members? It was regrettable we didn't push

harder and get a good outcome for all of us, not just some of us. Another NEC member pointed out that many of our existing NHS pension scheme members could transfer to Children's Trusts – and this would damage our pension rights under this agreement. Another hoped we would achieve the same benefits for local government members as we had for health and the civil service. A fourth said there were double standards when the media bashed local government workers or Mark Serwotka, but MPs had a copper bottomed pension scheme, the most generous in Europe.

Gail said the deal was positive, and it was untrue to say that there was disunity and the benefits of a united campaign had gone. The NEC endorsed the report.

Conference Arrangements

Arrangements for the 2007 Policy Conference were discussed. The proposal is for 785 delegates in total (excluding the GPM, who have a guaranteed 100 delegates). The Health Sector would have 55 delegates. The Women's Conference would elect 79 delegates to Policy Conference. Regional delegations would be pro rata to paying membership in the region.

The NEC discussed an overall 20% reduction in the size of national sector conferences, national sector committees, regional sector committees, and the Women's conference. The national Health Sector Conference would have 120 delegates. There was a brief debate about the pros and cons of reducing the size of these bodies. One NEC member said we did a disservice to our members making the numbers so tight, while another said it was important that our activists had a sense of ownership of the union, these bodies had to be representative, and that accommodation costs were sharply reduced anyway by having one day conferences and committees. Others disagreed, saying we had to pick the best people, and we had to manage the finances of the union.

The document was referred back to sectors for consultation, and will come back to the GPFC.

Trustee Company

Technical faults were reported regarding the setting of the Trustee Company. On legal advice, the NEC passed the following motion:

The National Executive Council ("the NEC") resolves that pursuant to Rule 30 of the Rules of Amicus ("the Rules") and any and all other powers it may have so to do, and until revoked by notice in writing given to the Trustee, the NEC hereby instructs Amicus Trustee Company Limited ("the Trustee") as follows:

- 1. The General Secretary for the time being (or if there shall be a vacancy in that office the Deputy General Secretary) may act and is hereby authorised to act on behalf of the Trustee in respect of all matters relating to the affairs of the Union through such person or persons to whom he may delegate (with such limitations as he may consider appropriate) any of his powers and/or responsibilities pursuant to the Rules in force for the time being and subject to any limitations prescribed in those Rules AND the Trustee is hereby further instructed to carry out and implement all or any instructions given to it by any of the foregoing persons.*
- 2. For the avoidance of doubt those persons who are authorised signatories to bank accounts holding Union funds at the date of this resolution shall remain authorised signatories and the NEC hereby authorises ratifies and adopts their acts past and future together with any and all acts past and future done by the General Secretary or by any person to whom any power or responsibility has been delegated by the General Secretary being in each case acts which would have been properly done had this resolution been in force at the date of such acts.*

There was a small amount of opposition to this motion, but it was overwhelmingly endorsed.

NEC Term of Office

There was a brief discussion about extending the term of office of NEC members. This would avoid an election campaign in the run up to the anticipated merger with the TGWU and the GMB. This was not put to a vote, possibly because of the large number of NEC members absent from the meeting. The necessary rule change would require a 75% majority (of all NEC members, not just those present).

Rules Amendments Implementation

The most contentious item here related to the election of full time officers. Previous NEC decisions have delayed implementation of the rule amendment to January 2006, and allowed the General Secretary to deploy staff and officers to cover for vacancies. The proposal put before the NEC was that Regional Officers shall be elected by members whose branch is located in the relevant region, and members of a national branch whose workplace is registered in that region. National Officers for a sector would be elected by all the members of the union eligible to vote.

A minority of NEC members supported an amendment to this, feeling that the National Officer for a sector should be elected by the members from that sector – that Finance members should vote for the Finance National Officer, Health members for the Health National Officer and so on. The General Secretary felt that this would limit his freedom to deploy National Officers flexibly, and the amendment was defeated. Another NEC member said we had to consider equalities issues, and the General Secretary agreed this was important.

Merger

Negotiations on the proposed merger with the TGWU and the GMB continue. No detailed information has been made available to the NEC. A new sub-group will be established,

composed of lay members and senior officers from each union, to consider issues of lay democracy, industrial sectors, and a communications strategy.

Motions and Correspondence

An NEC member put a resolution calling for support and a donation to the 'Keep Our NHS Public' campaign. This was approved subject to the agreement of the Health Sector National Committee.

A motion on opposition to ID cards was held over until the next NEC.

Motions on employment law, opposing privatisation of the post office, mandatory workplace pension schemes and calling on the government to reduce energy costs were supported.

A substantial donation (just under £10,000) was made to the Defend Council Housing lobby of Parliament, to take place next February. This will fund Westminster Main Hall, and ensure that Amicus is promoted as the lead trade union in the campaign to defend council housing.

Gill George
4th December 2005