

## Report of Unite Executive Council Special Meeting, 9<sup>th</sup> October 2008

*This report is written for members in the Health Sector of Unite. This is a purely personal report, reflecting my own impressions of the meeting. This is of course not a formal record of the Executive Council meeting, and should not be considered as such.*

The background to the special meeting is a complex one, discussed on my blog: <http://gillgeorge.wordpress.com/>

The Executive was called to discuss changes to the General Rules and Amicus section rules that would delay implementation of the new rule book for six months (and therefore delay the ending of Amicus and TGWU as separate sections, the setting up of united regional and industrial committees and so on); also to permit the calling of an election for General Secretary of the Amicus section.

A great deal of discussion took place before the formal Executive meeting: in unofficial caucus meetings, and in separate Amicus and TGWU section meetings. I believe that an Amicus section meeting took place, but a number of Amicus section Executive members (including myself) are not invited to these. TGWU section meetings are open to all TGWU section Executive members.

The actual Executive meeting was a relatively short one.

JGS Tony Woodley briefly introduced the proposed rule changes. He talked about the need to end the uncertainty brought about by the challenge to Derek staying in office until age 66, and stressed his own support for the election. He outlined the problems with integration of the two sections, saying that integration was moving at best slowly and at worst not at all. In those circumstances it was inappropriate to move forward with an implementation date of 1st November.

JGS Derek Simpson said we were sometimes caught up in practicalities. It was unfortunate

the situation we were in, that we had to conduct an election in order to carry out the clear wishes of members. He and Tony Woodley were both doing the rounds of officers and staff, and explanations were being given and understood. The overwhelming majority of members would understand. Agreeing the rule change would deliver the integration that members demanded.

I spoke, expressing my own disappointment, and my strong disagreement with the proposals. I talked about the economic crisis, and the impact this was already having on our members' jobs. Our priority should be fighting on jobs and pensions, not worrying about whether one of our Joint General Secretaries stayed in office until 2009 or 2010. I talked about the very strong risk that the Union will face legal challenges to the rule changes; and - whether those legal challenges were won or lost - the Union could spend the next year bogged down in internal nonsense. I also talked about the reports, including those from Tony Woodley, that integration is being held up deliberately, and my fears that we could now see six months more of obstruction, and an election based on setting Amicus members against T&G members. This was an important vote, for the future direction of our own union, and of the trade union movement. I had to vote 'No'.

Another EC member agreed. He said the election campaign would be characterised by division - by attacks being made on one section of our members. The rule changes wouldn't end uncertainty. So long as debates were confined to the top of the union, and

lay members weren't sat on the same committees and the same training courses, this allowed the fear of the bogey man from the other side to divide us. The sooner we moved on with integration the better.

A third EC member shared some of these concerns, although saying he would vote for the proposals. He said he wanted a commitment from both Joint General Secretaries that there would significant progress in the next six months.

Another speaker said there would be legal challenges. However, we shouldn't blame the two General Secretaries for slow integration – we should blame ourselves for not kicking them. We were the ones who controlled the union, and we should be delivering for our members.

The next speaker disagreed with the concerns he had heard. He didn't believe there was a problem with integration, and there was a willingness to make it happen. This was about defending the rule book. We should move to a vote.

Another speaker expressed concerns, while saying he would vote for the proposals. Activists wanted integration and wanted to move forward – not a union that was battling about General Secretaries. There was a real possibility of legal challenges, and a legal challenge being brought could set us back again. He asked for Georgina Hirsch (Head of Legal Services) as a legal expert to comment on the risks.

The final EC member to speak felt that people were getting confused. It was the Executive's job to seriously weigh up the evidence. There were problems with integration. This wasn't delaying integration, but acknowledging that it had been delayed. This was the responsibility of the Executive. It was sad that people were still talking about Amicus and T&G; people were still talking

about the T&G as a bastion of lay democracy, but it had never felt like that. We had to isolate the problems and put them right. We needed to get into everyone's heads that we don't run the Union for the General Secretaries.

Derek Simpson and Tony Woodley responded to the debate.

Derek said the Union was leading every struggle in the union movement. We'd demonstrated that at the Labour Party Conference and the TUC. No union was fighting harder. He and Tony were on the regional tour, talking about the 100% campaign. Members were not up in arms feeling the union had lost its path. Members needed to know how lay democracy can work, and how they could get involved in committees and get involved in shaping the union. On integration, despite the implication 'We know who is responsible', everyone knew that no one was responsible. It wasn't easy fitting large numbers of members into new sections, but integration wasn't about back office problems, it was about the members. He and Tony would not be deflected from this by people who represented no one and didn't have the interests of the members at heart. The Union had to succeed: with the continuation of a Labour Government, and ending anti-union laws, pay restraint and the effects of credit crunch. On the election, we should let lay democracy work.

Georgina Hirsch responded to the question about legal challenges to the rule changes. She said she didn't think a legal challenge would succeed, but anything you did in the union movement could be legally challenged – that might be something Amicus had brought to the party.

Tony Woodley said two people had a vision (of the merged union); this was the most

significant change in our movement for many decades. We couldn't risk failing to deliver on the hopes and desires of millions of working class people. This was worth fighting for. On the election and the need for Derek to stand, there was nothing we could do about it, but it was a side show – the real show was integration. He knew why we'd got a problem – it was a tribal approach, people looking behind us to who would be the next General Secretary. We couldn't carry on in the way we were, slagging off one another's sections, it was divisive. We couldn't allow this to fail; history wouldn't forgive us. We should not allow anything to get in the way.

***Gill George***

***11<sup>th</sup> October 2008***