



International Newsletter

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Winter 2009

A resource for UNISON branches and regions (and those interested in UNISON's international work).
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International committee roundup

The international committee last met on 11 November. Among the key decisions taken it was agreed to continue funding a capacity building project with the PGFTU in Palestine; to organise a delegation to Colombia to reinvigorate contacts with sister unions (jointly with the German union ver.di); to fund a project with the CSEA, our sister union in Zimbabwe, to assist recruitment and restructuring and to commission research into compliance with ILO conventions relating to public service workers and into aspects of the impact of liberalisation on public services and public service trade unions in the global south. It was also agreed to support the Latin America 2009 conference;

to attend the congress of our Norwegian sister union Fagforbundet; and to be represented at the Palestine Solidarity Campaign AGM early next year.

UNISON at Canadian convention

President Gerry Gallagher, together with Nick Sigler, head of international relations, attended the biennial congress of our Canadian sister union in Montreal in October. The centrepiece of the discussions was CUPE's strategic plan for the next two years but the detail of the discussion would not have been unfamiliar to a UNISON member – the impact of the economic crisis, creeping privatisation, the erosion of trade union rights, the need to extend disability and equality rights and the poor state of workers' pensions. Internationally CUPE are active in, among other places, Burma, Colombia, Cuba, the Philippines and South Africa. As a result of the visit we are now looking at ways in which we can co-operate on a number of international projects.

UNISON president says struggles here similar in South Africa public services

UNISON President, Gerry Gallagher, attended the 9th congress of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) at the beginning of November. UNISON has worked with SAMWU since 1987 when UNISON sent its first delegation to South Africa to learn how workers struggle under apartheid.

There was considerable debate about the need to bring younger activists into senior positions in the union and the relationship between regions and the centre. As a result, after two decades of service to the union, Petros Mashishi and Nxu Xolile moved on from their positions as president and deputy president respectively. Sam Molohe (president) and Nomvula Hadi (deputy president) have been elected in their place. The 600 delegates demonstrated their engagement in the debates by sitting in session from 9am until after 7pm. The political education amongst SAMWU activists was also clearly apparent. One of the most significant differences from a UNISON conference was the tradition of singing to make a political statement, whether to show unity, argue a point or demonstrate opposition.

Gerry Gallagher said that from listening to the debates and talking to many of the delegates informally, it was obvious that many of our struggles were similar. "Our issues in public services are the same. We can all learn from each other and finally we must never forget that our greatest strength is our unity - as workers and as an international trade union movement. By standing together and supporting each other we will succeed."

The congress has strengthened the relationship between SAMWU and UNISON. We are looking forward to working with SAMWU on issues of joint concern, in particular how we can together defend and strengthen public services and support sister unions in Zimbabwe.

Expanding UNISON's international work

Almost 100 branch and regional international officers participated in the recent international seminar in Leeds. Colin Burgon, MP for Elmet in Leeds set the scene for the weekend with a speech which got debate flourishing about political education, immigration and what we can learn from developments in Venezuela. Sessions were run on *Justice for Palestinians*, *Public service workers' rights under attack*, *Latin America* and the *Million Voices campaign*. Participants also shared ideas about how they carry out their role in their branches.

Some of the comments received from delegates demonstrated how useful the seminars are in helping branch international officers develop their role within their branches and develop a better understanding of UNISON's international work:

"Good to meet and work with international officers to see how I, as a new international officer, can take this back to the branch to raise awareness."

"Good to hear what other regions are up to. I now feel inspired to be more active and enthusing my branch to get involved."

"Networking and hearing about initiatives in other parts of the country helps."

Over 35 people visited a local picket line, before the seminar began on Saturday and Sunday mornings, to show support for UNISON comrades on strike as part of the Leeds refuse workers' dispute.

Public service trade unions under attack in Swaziland

Sister trade unions continue to be under attack in Swaziland. As an absolute monarchy, Swaziland does not hold elections. While political parties can operate, political activity is heavily repressed.

The government of Swaziland have responded to calls for democracy from the trade union movement and other democratic movements with increasingly restrictive legislation and practices. Since May 2008 the Suppression of Terrorism Act has been used to arrest, detain and even torture a number of political activists who have dared to speak out against the regime. The government are currently proposing a Public Services Bill, which would further restrict those on the government payroll from speaking out and it is expected to restrict trade union activity even further.

The trade union movement, banned political parties and the Swaziland United Democratic Front have been vocal in their calls for the repeal of the Suppression of Terrorism Act and other repressive legislation. Indeed they want the introduction of multi-party democracy and a people driven constitution. Despite a growing movement within southern Africa, including the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU), supporting these calls the situation in Swaziland receives little attention from the international community.

UNISON is working with our sister union the National Public Services and Allied Workers Union and was proud to support the recent UK tour by Vincent Dlamini, their general secretary, organised by Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA).

Continuing repression of trade unions in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean trade unions report that the new power sharing government, between ZANU PF and the Movement for Democratic Change, is not delivering significant progress as far as the unions are concerned.

Trade unionists continue to be persecuted for their activities. Most recently, a strike at a mine was violently broken up by the police. As a result the president of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), Lovemore Matombo, and four other unionists were charged (although later released) under the notorious Public Order and Security Act (POSA), which has been used against the ZCTU and its affiliates on several occasions over a number of years by the Mugabe regime.

Vimbai Zinyama Mushongera, vice-president of the ZCTU participated in a UNISON-funded speaker tour, organised by Action for Southern Africa in November. She addressed regional UNISON meetings in the Midlands and the South East as well as events with the UNISON group of MPs and national officers. You can read an in-depth interview which the ITUC conducted with Vimbai in November <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spotlight-interview-with-vimbai.html>

UNISON's international committee is currently supporting an innovative recruitment campaign by the Civil Service Employees Association, as well as developing links with the Zimbabwe Urban Council Workers Union.

UNISON members are urged to continue their support for sister unions in Zimbabwe by raising awareness of the situation and contributing to the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union's Dignity.Period campaign. Visit www.actsa.org/page-1022-Dignity.html to donate.

UNISON secondment to Sierra Leone

For the past year, Daphne Kabia, UNISON South-East area organiser has been on secondment with the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union (SLTU) to provide support and advice to the SLTU's capacity development programmes.

During her 12-month secondment Daphne has been advising the SLTU in its review of the union's constitution. She helped to organise their quadrennial conferences which took place across the country from June through to August, and delivered a solidarity statement on behalf of Dave Prentis. She is currently working on SLTU's women capacity development programme and several other projects before returning to the UK in February 2010.

Daphne played a key role in presenting proposed recommendations from the constitutional review committee to the conferences and organised meetings for women delegates to introduce them to the business of conference and the

election process. Women form approximately 40% of the union but yet hold less than 30% of leadership positions. Daphne has been instrumental in getting women to become active and take leadership roles within the union, and this year's conference saw the highest ever number of women delegates at such Conference.

Another success saw the inauguration of a full women's committee (formerly called the women's 'wing'). As a result of this achievement the first ever SLTU Women's Conference took place in November 2009 making SLTU the first trade union in the country to organise a women's conference. Sponsorship for the conference was provided by UNISON national, UNISON northern region, Danish Teachers' Trade Union and a local NGO, ENCISS using Daphne's proposals which are now be employed as an effective tool to seek funding from and establish new links with international partners and local NGOs.

Davidson Kuyateh the secretary general of SLTU said that by Daphne sharing her experience with SLTU the union had been able to build capacity for its officers and staff. He said: "Daphne understands, particularly, our cultural context. She has used that understanding positively and constructively to impact the mindset of our women members. Daphne has been a wonderful guide and inspiration to our women members: she is truly regarded by them, excitedly as a trade unionist role model worthy of emulation"

UNISON south east regional secretary Phil Wood concluded: "This is a great opportunity for us to learn from our colleagues in Sierra Leone as well as build links. The challenges workers and trade unions face are different but we can help each other by exchanging ideas and offering mutual support. This is particularly important for workers, such as those in Sierra Leone, who organise in very difficult circumstances. We're looking forward to hearing first hand from Daphne when she returns in the New Year."

Urgent action for Western Sahara

Aminattou Haider, a human rights defender from Western Sahara, was expelled from Morocco on 14 November and her passport confiscated. She has been on hunger strike at Lanzarote airport since her deportation. She wants the right to return to her own homeland without conditions being imposed (she has been told to denounce self-determination for the Saharawi people and say that Western Sahara is part of Morocco). Her health is failing. Please get involved and call for her release. Ask others to respond to this urgent action. www.unison.org.uk/international/pages_view.asp?did=10256
Sign up to receive UNISON urgent actions which you can use to take action in your branch www.unison.org.uk/international/index.asp

TUC visits projects in Palestine

Nick Crook, UNISON international officer, recently took part in a small TUC delegation to Palestine to see how the TUC-PGFTU (Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions) capacity building projects were being delivered. UNISON is one of the core funders of this work. The delegation was able to sit in on one of the training sessions preparing PGFTU reps for workplace

elections. The international committee, at its November meeting, agreed to continue funding this work in 2010.

The delegation also met with Shaher Saed, the general secretary of the PGFTU, who expressed their satisfaction with the TUC's general council and the FBU resolution on Palestine (seconded by UNISON) which were adopted by TUC Congress in September. In particular he welcomed the decision to call for a boycott of goods produced in the illegal Israeli settlements. In addition, the PGFTU raised with the delegation the issue of lack of enforcement of labour law in the settlements as a key concern.

Bitter Dates: working conditions in the settlements

The Israeli labour rights NGO, Kav La'Oved, which works with the PGFTU on the issue of working conditions in the settlements, has produced a short film about the situation of Palestinians who work in Israeli agricultural settlements in the occupied Jordan Valley. The film, Bitter Dates, documents the appalling conditions faced by the Palestinian workers. A grant from UNISON has enabled the film to be translated into English. The film, which is only 15 minutes long and is ideal for showing at branch or regional meetings, can be found on YouTube www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwTZ2xeSAkM

Supporting olive oil production in Palestine

UNISON's international committee agreed at its November meeting to make a grant to Zaytoun, the co-operative which sells Palestinian olive oil in the UK. Zaytoun olive oil has also recently been granted Fair Trade status. The production of olives and olive oil is central to Palestinian agriculture and are some of the few products exported. The grant will enable Zaytoun to develop its work with Palestinian olive co-operatives and farmers.

UNISON activists continue to show their support of Zaytoun by buying their products whenever the opportunity arises. At the international seminar in Leeds Zaytoun set up a stall which raised over £400. Zaytoun volunteer Najeeb Rayman said the sale (which lasted no longer than 30-40 minutes of actual sale time) "has set a precedent and benchmark for all future sales! Personally I feel that selling Palestinian produce is a very positive initiative, and helps to reduce dependency, and supports the dignity and livelihoods of the Palestinian population, and the success at the seminar will hopefully spur on further initiatives in Yorkshire."

If you want to find out more about getting Zaytoun along to one of your events/meetings to sell Palestinian produce (olive oil, olives, herbs, almonds and soap) and hear about their work and how you can support it, contact www.zaytoun.org

UNISON forges closer links with French counterpart

UNISON has signed a co-operation agreement with the Public Services Federation of the French trade union, Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). UNISON has had long links with the CGT and has worked increasingly

closely with this federation over the past few years. The CGT is the largest French trade union, both in numbers and in elected workplace representatives. The Public Services Federation covers local government workers, local police staff and workers in water and environmental services. The agreement also foresees greater co-operation with the other CGT federations in health and social services and energy.

The role of the ILO in protecting workers' rights

At a packed international seminar in October in Leeds, UNISON activists heard from PSI (global union in public services) rights' officer, Chidi King, on the role of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in protecting the rights of public service workers.

The ILO, the only body of the United Nations which gives workers a voice, formulates and monitors international conventions which seek to protect the rights of workers. But PSI believes that the rights of workers enshrined in ILO conventions are being undermined by laws designed to strip workers of their rights.

The view that violations of workers' rights are only about killings, disappearances, imprisonment and physical attacks is being challenged in the face of legalised restrictions on trade unions and their members. These restrictions, including removing the right of a worker to join a trade union and bargain collectively, amount to violations of workers' fundamental rights: rights enshrined in ILO conventions which many countries of the UN have said they will honour and protect.

UNISON has produced a briefing on the workings of the ILO and how it applies to public service workers. It looks at how conventions are applied (and violated) and discusses the concept of minimum service provision in essential services whereby governments and employers are undermining trade unions' right to organise.

The briefing can be downloaded from the international pages of the website if branch international officers wish to use it as a resource in their branches.

www.unison.org.uk/file/ILO.pdf

Million Voices campaign goes global

Since UNISON launched its Million Voices campaign in support of public services, sister unions around the globe have been adding their voices and 'speaking out for public services'.

UNISON stands up for public services in the UK, and its international policy has included standing up for public services worldwide. Nick Sigler, UNISON's head of international relations, believes that now, as the recession bites and attacks on public services increase, is the ideal time for branches to talk about the international dimension of Million Voices, "because it's a global economic crisis that we're facing, and our agenda for promoting public services and social justice applies internationally.

“It’s important to talk with our sister unions across the world so we can expect pressure on all our governments to look for solutions to the current economic crisis - solutions to benefit working people here, in the US, in Europe or in Africa.”

And in response to calls for support for our Million Voices campaign, trade union leaders such as Wellington Chibebe president of ZCTU in Zimbabwe, Peter Waldorff (general secretary) and Ylva Thorn (president) of PSI, Paul Moist president of CUPE in Canada and Bill Lucy president of AFSCME in the USA have all added their voices along with colleagues from Sweden, Botswana, Australia, Japan, Colombia, Austria, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Russia and Norway.

The global recession has brought the international trade union movement closer and UNISON is at the forefront of forging links with sister unions overseas. This year UNISON signed agreements with ver.di (Germany) and FP-CGIL (Italy), and more recently with CGT (France), to cooperate across borders to protect people’s jobs and defend public services.

You can see which global unions are supporting UNISON’s Million Voices campaign here www.unison.org.uk/million/solidarity.asp

Add your voice and speak up for public services www.unison.org.uk/million

Regional news

A roundup of some events/activities from UNISON regions and branches around the UK. Please contact IRelations@unison.co.uk if you have articles for consideration.

Welsh Assembly celebrates progress in Latin America

UNISON Cymru/Wales organised a reception in the Welsh Assembly to celebrate 50 years of social progress in Cuba, 10 years of social and democratic reforms in Venezuela and the first election of an indigenous Indian as president of Bolivia.

In the company of the ambassadors of Cuba and Venezuela over 30 Assembly members attended and expressed a commitment to supporting and setting up a friendship group with Latin America. The intention of the group will be to promote friendship and respect for each others’ cultures and to work in solidarity to face the social challenges ahead.

First Minister Rhodri Morgan applauded the progress that each of the three countries have made recently particularly in social development such as housing, health and education.

In response Ambassador Moncada of Venezuela gave a brief overview of the progress made in Venezuela and how the country was now using oil revenue to look after the most vulnerable in society. He pointed out to the First Minister

that if he were to return to Venezuela today he would now be witnessing running water, electricity, schools, hospitals and surgeries where previously there were none.

The Cuban Ambassador stressed the importance of the formation of a Latin American friendship group and applauded the already existing collaboration that exists between Cuba and Cymru/Wales and hoped for this work to expand and develop.

Paul O'Shea UNISON regional secretary thanked the ambassadors for their presence and stated: "It is a proud moment for UNISON to have played such a key role in bringing this gathering together and demonstrates UNISON's continuing proud record of international work here in Wales."

London activist attends congress in Nicaragua

*This article was written by Ruby Cox, former chair of Greater London Region international committee and current chair of Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign
Email IRelations@unison.co.uk for a full copy of the report*

This year I had the outstanding good fortune to make two trips to Nicaragua, firstly in July on a trade union delegation organised by Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, and then in October to represent UNISON at the national congress of our sister public service union in Nicaragua, UNE.

On 22 October I found myself stepping off a plane into the heat and humidity of Managua armed with an array of documents in English and Spanish, a bag full of UNISON goodies and a reconditioned laptop, a last minute thought prompted by receiving a request from Pablo, a community organiser, and an NSC group in Leeds offering to pay for a laptop from ComputerAid International.

The congress, where I delivered an address on behalf of UNISON, was a huge success with UNE's general secretary extending his thanks and gratitude to UNISON for its support. It culminated in the signing of a twinning agreement between UNISON and UNE.

I had also undertaken to do further work for NSC after UNE's congress, and travelled to a remote area of the country to witness the progress of the literacy campaign which was part-funded by NSC. This involved travelling along the Rio Coco by canoe and delivering the necessary materials – generators, TVs, DVD players, DVDs, books and writing materials - all of which were donated by Cuba and Venezuela - to enable the literacy classes to run. There was no electricity, which was where NSC came in - they provided the fuel which ran the generators to run the electrical equipment. It was so inspiring to see the enthusiasm with which the adult students embraced the classes - for them it was the chance to have some power over their own lives and to be able to look forward to a better future for themselves and their children.

Greater London UNISON has now signed twinning agreements with the Managua region of both UNE and FETSALUD, the health workers' union. There is great scope now for other regions to become involved; this is an

exciting time of great change for Nicaragua, which is such a diverse country; from the Caribbean coast where ethnic communities speak languages other than Spanish to Managua and other historic cities such as Esteli, Granada and Masaya. If you would like to know more go to www.nicaraguasc.org.uk.

UNISON activists in Scotland join delegation to Venezuela

By Matthew Crighton and Mike Kirby of UNISON Scotland

A recent trade union delegation to Venezuela, organised by Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, included several UNISON activists who were privileged to see first hand the successes achieved by the Bolivarian revolution.

The delegation visited Caricuao, one of the many *barrios* or shanty towns that grew up around Caracas which previously had little or no access to public services. Under President Chavez, social missions (*misiones*) have brought medical care through which the doctors (from Cuba) are now able to detect preventable diseases like diabetes and hypertension, resulting in many lives being saved.

Another important meeting for the delegation was with representatives of the trade union centre, Centro Trabajadores Socialista (CTS), which was set up in 2007 and is now organised around 17 sectors, including health and education.

Asked what they saw to be the key achievements of the Chavez governments, the CTS representatives said the National Constitution because it protects the rights of workers and outlaws privatisation of key public services and industries. They also listed the renationalisation of electricity and telecommunications industries and the use of resources of the PDVSA, the nationalised oil company, to fund the *misiones*.

The vice-minister of labour, Elio Colmenares, welcomed UNISON and the other British trade unionists to his office where he told them about some of the successes over the past ten years including extending pensions to 1.5m people from 120,000 in 1998, having the highest minimum wage in the whole of Latin America, increasing trade union membership from 9% to 23% and nationalising over 70 companies which had been closed down by their owners.

Commenting on the visit, Matthew Crighton of Edinburgh City branch said: "People in Britain should know that democracy is alive, participative and vibrant in Venezuela. If we had this kind of government in Britain, I'd be delighted. It deserves our support. Venezuela's achievements show us an alternative route for the world economy."

Download the full report www.unison.org.uk/file/VSC.pdf

Resources

As new technologies increase our access to educational and information materials, UNISON is providing a variety of resources for activists to use to take forward international work in branches. We now provide access to short videos on YouTube, online newsletters and publications for downloading and

downloadable photos which can be used in branch publications. Look at the resource section of the website for details www.unison.org.uk/international. Branches will still be able to order limited hardcopy publications including the recent report on the southern Africa delegation and the leaflet on why UNISON is involved in international work. These and other free publications can be ordered using UNISON's online catalogue www.unison.org.uk/resources/onlinecatalogue.asp

Events

13 January: Decent work: what does it add to eliminating poverty and promoting recovery from the financial crisis?

13.00-17.00 SOAS, London

'Decent work: what does it add to eliminating poverty and promoting recovery from the financial crisis?' will feature a presentation of the findings and recommendations from the study commissioned by the Forum, and speakers from Bangladesh and Zambia will provide direct perspectives of decent work and development needs from developing countries. DFID representatives will also participate in the discussions.

The TUC is registering for this event. Email Sharon Sukhram at ssukhram@tuc.org.uk or Tanya Warlock at twarlock@tuc.org.uk

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