

NEC Women's Sub-Committee / Equalities Committee, 14 January 2021

Returning after a strange and subdued winter break, these were the first NEC meetings of the New Year. The women's sub-committee congratulated Christina McAnea on her election as general secretary of UNISON, the first woman to hold the position.

The committee moved on to discuss arrangements for the women's conference, to be held online on Saturday 26 and Sunday 27 June. The party is commissioning a new online platform together with voting technology, designed to be user-friendly and accessible to everyone. Plans for annual conference are currently keeping open options for an in-person, online or hybrid event, but it's hard to envisage thousands of people packing into Brighton in September, so the women's conference will also test the systems required to deliver a full-scale online autumn conference.

A newsletter will go out soon to women members including a survey of what you would like to discuss, and I urge you to fill this in, so the national women's officer and her team can finalise the programme and invite speakers and panellists. Suggestions included women on the Covid frontline as NHS staff, shop-workers, carers and others, and the future world of work. Members asked for guidelines covering online conduct and pointed out that support with childcare should be considered as usual, bearing in mind that joining the conference from home does not necessarily remove the need.

New Democracy

As well as debating and voting on motions and participating in breakout sessions, delegates will elect the following representatives to the new national women's committee:

- Six members elected by CLPs
- Six members elected by affiliated trade unions
- One member elected by socialist societies

Voting members will also include one member elected by women MPs, one member elected by each of the Scottish and Welsh women's committees, and the NEC vice-chair for women. In addition women NEC members, the minister / shadow minister with responsibility for women, and a woman appointed by national BAME, disabled members or Young Labour organisations may attend without voting power.

Women wishing to stand for the six CLP places will be invited to post a photo and a statement on the party website and candidates will require nominations from five CLPs to go through to the ballot. CLP representatives were concerned that current deadlines were too tight, especially if Scottish, Welsh, local, mayoral and other elections go ahead in May and CLP meetings are paused. Final information about the timetable, delegates, nominations and motions will be circulated soon.

Paying the Bills

In November the NEC were told that the delegate fee would be £40 to cover the significant costs of new technology, with the rate for visitors yet to be decided. Every CLP will be entitled to two voting delegates, of whom at least one must be BAME, disabled or LGBT+. Some members were concerned that diversity would be reduced if CLPs economised by only sending one delegate. I doubt if this will be an issue where a second delegate only costs £40, but it will be when in-person conferences resume, adding several hundred pounds per person for travel and accommodation.

I proposed that the NEC democracy and diversity fund should pay the delegate fees for all CLPs. The justification is that these NEC funds hold the balance of membership subscription income, after £2.75 per member is returned to CLPs and after fixed costs are met centrally. These fixed costs are Contact Creator, election insurance, one free annual conference pass and £300 per year to fight European elections. As there have been no European elections since 2019, CLPs are already "owed" nearly £600 each, and £80 for the 2021 women's conference would be a down payment.

Other Business

The NEC is continuing with all-women shortlists at local and national level, in order to maintain as well as to achieve at least 50% women's representation. There were questions about the Scottish and Welsh regional lists and whether STV can produce fair gender-zipped lists in a single ballot, or whether this could result in women (or men) with more high preferences emerging behind women (or men) with fewer high preferences. According to my geeky friends this depends on the exact counting method being used.

Future work will include engaging more women at every level, especially young women. CLPs are encouraged to establish and empower women's branches, and guidance on how to transition from women's forums is at <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Guide-for-Transition-to-Women-Branched.pdf> . Where there is a general committee structure the recommendation is that women's branches should be entitled to two GC delegates.

Equalities Committee

Under reports from stakeholders the Labour Women's Network highlighted the urgent need to improve procedures for tackling sexual harassment, with one high-profile case taking more than three years and the respondent resigning just before the final stage. The Labour Muslim Network were putting together an action plan around Islamophobia, and had met with the leader, the deputy leader and the general secretary. I asked about progress towards affiliating nationally as a socialist society, which would enable branches of the Muslim Network to affiliate to their local CLPs.

This was followed by a detailed update on the EHRC action plan. Although there are legal imperatives and hard deadlines for addressing anti-semitism, the working group stressed that there were moral imperatives for moving forward on all protected characteristics. There should be no hierarchy of prejudice and discrimination. Intersectionality was acknowledged, with BAME and Jewish women, for instance, experiencing far more abuse than their male colleagues. Definitions and codes of conduct were being developed, but the absence of specific codes did not give members licence to be racist or transphobic.

The EHRC plan refers to the need for culture change at every level of the party. This is to be developed as part of Organise To Win, launched in July 2020. I have asked for more information about all this, as it was formulated before I rejoined the NEC and has not filtered down to local parties.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities

Proposals for work on this area of prejudice had been circulating since 2019, and the committee considered plans for a working group to determine a definition of anti-Gypsyism. There was much support for progress in this hitherto neglected area, and I recommend that local parties consider inviting a speaker from the Labour GRT campaign. Committee members called for a majority of the group to be from the GRT communities, and stressed their diversity, including fairground and barge travellers. Others suggested that the group should move beyond definitions to look at tackling social exclusion, barriers and discrimination in housing, education, and within the party itself. Also the IHRA published a working definition of anti-Gypsyism / anti-Roma discrimination in October 2020, and the group might consider adopting or adapting this rather than reinventing wheels. James Asser as chair of the equalities committee would aim to take the work forward without further lengthy delays

Looking Ahead

Root-and-branch reform of the party's selection procedures was requested, as increasing diversity needed wholesale institutional change. In 2019 only six of 100 candidates in top target seats were from a BAME background. Better support should have been provided for losing candidates, and their experiences could inform future progress. The committee also approved a working group on disability.

I raised two issues. The first was a motion from Sheffield Central which seeks to change council candidate selection processes so that if a disabled member on the candidates' panel is nominated, they will automatically be shortlisted. This is similar to procedures for BAME candidates in parliamentary selections, and I hope it will be discussed when the organisation committee meets on 21 January.

The second is the longstanding need for CLP equalities officers to be able to communicate with their members. For women and young members the information is available to CLP and branch secretaries, so it is a matter of extending access to MemberCentre and Organise. For self-defining BAME and disabled members, their status is held centrally but not available to local parties at all. LGBT+ status is not recorded at the moment. There is no easy answer, but local BAME, disabled, LGBT+, youth and women's officers need to contact their members, especially with the move from forums to newly-empowered branches.

As usual please contact me with any comments or questions, and I'm happy to visit your meetings.

Ann Black, 07956-637958, annblack50@btinternet.com. Previous reports are at www.annblack.co.uk