

## **National Executive Committee Report, 11 February 2021**

Keir Starmer joined from Heathrow where he was supporting Unite members, on strike against plans to fire and rehire them on worse conditions. He stressed the importance of the May elections. With Scotland, Wales, London, councils, mayors, police and crime commissioners, and all the 2020 contests rolled in, this was the biggest test outside a UK general election. With normal campaigning on pause, phone canvassing was central. Before then the budget on 3 March would present clear choices. The last year had a huge impact on families and jobs, and Labour had challenged the government on its slowness, incompetence and indecision, its underfunding of public services, and the underlying structural inequalities laid bare by the pandemic. The Tories would go back to the broken past, while Labour would build forwards, just as the 1945 Labour government created a better society out of the rubble of war. Policies on health and wellbeing, power, and the economy would be developed across the movement. In parliament Labour had used opposition day debates to call for maintaining the £20 uplift to universal credit and to highlight the scandal of unsafe cladding still in place four years after Grenfell. The Tories don't even bother to turn up.

Responding to comments, Keir Starmer agreed that postal votes were critical, job retention schemes should be extended before they expire, public service workers deserved pay rises, and long Covid was a growing concern. The low level of statutory sick pay was the biggest reason for Covid-positive people not self-isolating and not passing on contact details for friends. The deepest form of patriotism was the desire for a better country, the cause for which we all campaign. Labour aspired to govern for the whole of the United Kingdom, and using the national flag was inclusive and appropriate.

I asked about the spycops (covert and human intelligence sources) bill. Keir Starmer said it was impossible to tackle terrorism, criminal gangs or people-trafficking without undercover agents. Currently these agents operate entirely outwith the law, and though not flawless the bill would put them on a statutory footing, with safeguards. No action could be authorised if it breached the human rights act, and it was not true that the bill legitimised murder, torture or sexual violence. I also asked for direct mailings to members, similar to the excellent local government briefings, highlighting the work of Labour MPs and explaining frontbench positions. Most of us have no other source of information.

On schools Keir Starmer assured the NEC that he was in frequent contact with the education unions. Far from uncritically following the government, Labour had challenged Boris Johnson over personal and protective equipment, discharging Covid-positive patients into care homes, failings in test / trace / isolate, and circuit-breakers, on all of which the Tories subsequently changed position, as well as continuing to hold them to account through opposition day debates. On protests by Indian farmers he would speak again with Stephen Kinnock, who was leading for Labour. He ended by offering to talk further with individuals, and most NEC members agreed that all efforts should go into flat-out campaigning for May.

### **Deputy Leader's Report**

Angela Rayner continued the election theme, and shared NEC members' concerns about safety for voters and election workers. Labour had made some progress on increasing the diversity of candidates, but there was much more to do. Parties with rich donors able to pay postage for direct mails should not gain an unfair advantage. She had visited a vaccination centre, met Black leaders in Birmingham, and supported GMB workers at British Gas also facing fire-and-rehire threats. Labour would keep pushing on free school meals and Tory cronyism. She asked the NEC to send solidarity to Charlotte Nichols, MP for Warrington North, who had received anti-semitic abuse from a Tory town council candidate.

Members said that much was still unclear. Do police and crime commissioner candidates still need 100 signatures, could people sign up electronically for postal votes, how will get-out-the-vote work on election day? For polling stations a few bottles of bleach and bring-your-own-pencil was not a plan. The government should be pressed to restore the scheme for access to elected office and funding for deaf and disabled people, and the party should consider what more it could do to support disabled members.

Others asked about the future of community organisers, a recurring theme of the meeting. As a UNISON activist Angela helped to lead the change to an organising culture which was so central to fighting austerity, and she was totally committed to the principles. (In my view year-round doorstep discussions with voters, being rooted in local communities and going beyond box-ticking voter-ID are what Labour activists and representatives should be doing anyway.) She was happy to help with signing up young people for postal votes, and praised the Welsh Labour government for leading the way on controlling the coronavirus.

## **Why Are We Waiting?**

NEC members were stunned to hear the latest from the Forde inquiry into last year's leaked report, though someone was not too stunned to forward the "confidential" letter to LabourList and the Guardian within minutes. Its publication will now wait till the information commissioner's office (ICO) has finished investigating the same leak, to avoid potentially prejudicing their work. I am (almost) speechless, but I can give categorical assurances that absolutely no-one in the leadership or the party wants this dragging on. Until the truth is out, slurs and falsehoods will continue to be stated as facts, within the NEC and beyond.

As the inquiry is independent the party cannot and would not interfere or make demands. However this raises questions about moving towards independent complaints procedures. The party's internal processes may be slow, but as an NEC representative I can still talk to staff about where cases have got stuck. Independence has its drawbacks. Meanwhile we were reminded that Forde's terms of reference never delegated the NEC's powers to adjudicate on individual disciplinary issues, and it is entirely proper for these to be heard by the disputes panels, as with any other allegations.

## **Internal Matters**

General secretary David Evans gave an update on organisational changes. A diversity and inclusion board, staff equalities networks, equality audits and improved recruitment practices were in hand, and the party was engaging with the Labour Women's Network, the Labour Muslim Network, and anti-Black racism movements. Training in anti-semitism would be provided to NEC members.

Along with other constituency representatives I raised the number of suspensions, the time taken to resolve them, the singling out of local chairs and secretaries, and the effects on those who had been selected as candidates, some of whom were being replaced before their cases were settled. Unfortunately banning people from discussing something is guaranteed to make them want to talk about nothing else.

David Evans reminded the NEC that the EHRC (equalities and human rights commission) held the national party legally responsible for the actions of its "agents", defined very broadly to include MPs, councillors, candidates and local role-holders. The culture had to be corrected but free speech was indeed important, and he would recast the guidance in a safe and inclusive manner. This would go to NEC officers for approval, and though I am in the officers' group I supported those who argued for involving the whole NEC.

David also said that where it was clear that the reported behaviour would not lead to serious sanctions, a suspension would not have to be imposed, something which I thought was already the case. The disproportionate impact on selected candidates was recognised, but sadly not remedied. A paper outlining what powers were delegated, and to whom, would come to the NEC in May.

Membership figures showed some decline from the highest-ever level in January 2020, but still well above the 430,359 total in November 2019. Overall more than 56% of members are male, and the proportions who self-identify as BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) or disabled are below population levels, though this might be improved by more proactive data collection. The percentage of BAME members who had lapsed or resigned was about the same as the percentage for membership as a whole.

## **Party Democracy**

More than 2,000 submissions on improving policy-making processes had been received, with concerns that current structures, and connections between the national policy forum, conference and the manifesto, were opaque. There was also wide recognition that Labour members are not necessarily representative of the public as a whole. The next phase of consultation was planned to run to early May, but I got this extended to June so that local parties can discuss it after the elections.

There will be a fully-democratic online women's conference in June, but whether annual conference can meet wholly or partly in person is still in doubt. Compositing would be a challenge, though the problems are compounded by leaving the deadline for motions at 13 September. This was necessary when motions had to meet the arbitrary "contemporary" criteria by referring to something happening after 1 August, but now that has been ditched the cutoff could be earlier, and allow for more sensible deliberation.

## Looking Forward ...

By the time we considered detailed plans for the May elections the meeting was entering its fifth hour, though some of the broader issues had already been covered. Representatives from Scotland and Wales, both facing general elections, spoke about their specific national challenges. Twinning and targeting should be easier while everyone is online rather than travelling, and disabled members must be fully included. I believe that accessibility issues with Dialogue, the phone-canvassing tool, are being addressed.

Returning to the NEC's own terms of reference, we agreed that papers should be circulated seven days before meetings. Getting nerdy, I am concerned that subcommittee minutes and officers' decisions no longer come to the next NEC in draft but have to be confirmed by their subcommittee first. With fewer meetings overall, this leaves many NEC members outside the loop for months. While I agree that the number of meetings is unlikely to correlate positively with electoral success, lengthy gaps mean that more decisions are taken by committee chairs or smaller and less accountable groups. There are no scheduled NEC meetings between 11 February and 25 May.

Vacancies on various committees and working groups were filled on the pleasingly consensual basis of accepting everyone who was interested. The group charged with developing a new structure for student members includes the NEC chair, vice-chair, treasurer, youth representative, socialist societies representative, the deputy leader/party chair, Michael Wheeler from the NEC trade union section, Luke Akehurst and Gemma Bolton from the CLP section, and the elected student representatives from the Young Labour national committee.

The only disagreement was in deciding which NEC members should join two West Midlands executive members in selecting candidates in Sandwell. I voted for Yasmine Dar, so that the NEC representatives would include a woman and a person of colour, but lost 18-14. However we are promised that immediately after May the new Sandwell Labour group will hold their AGM and a proper Sandwell local government committee will be constituted and empowered to manage future selections.

## More about Money

A paper on CLP fees and funding, arising from the 2018 democracy review, had been deferred before and was now seriously out of date. As I have said many times the 2011 Refounding Labour settlement needs a root-and-branch review. I was shocked to hear that Scottish CLPs are charged £600 or more to affiliate to Scottish Labour, way above the English regional fees of up to £270, and on a much smaller membership. So a CLP with 280 members receives £770 from membership subscriptions and then gets a bill for £660 before paying for a single leaflet.

I am initially asking for the Euro-levy to be refunded on the same flat-rate basis as it was collected, which should amount to over £1,000 per CLP. Also conference 2020 was cancelled so the £116 delegate fee should be credited as well. But more fundamental reforms and a fairer, more sustainable system are needed. The NEC did, however, agree that members of Labour International should be eligible for reduced membership rates on the same basis as other members, now they no longer require expensive postage.

And finally the NEC agreed to commit to the armed forces covenant, supporting the employment of veterans, reservists and service spouses and partners, and noted a report on Labour Connected.

As usual please feel free to circulate and/or post online, and comments and questions are always welcome.

*Ann Black, 07956-637958, [annblack50@btinternet.com](mailto:annblack50@btinternet.com). Previous reports are at [www.annblack.co.uk](http://www.annblack.co.uk)*