

South East Regional Executive Committee, 15 September 2021

This was the last full meeting of the old-style regional board, before the new south-east regional executive committee takes office following the regional conference on 20 / 21 November 2021 at Reading University.

Acting regional director Ellie Buck gave an update on the implementation of Organise to Win, as announced to the NEC in July (see <http://www.annblack.co.uk/nec-meeting-20-july-2021/>) with the party's new structure linking south-east, south-west and London regions into a southern hub. Information for CLPs and other stakeholders would be circulated after annual conference. Members expressed solidarity with the staff in challenging times, reiterated long-standing concerns about under-resourcing and excessive workloads, and hoped that service to activists would at least be maintained. Vince Maple and Elaine Bolton as chair and vice-chair would write yet another letter to the NEC.

Heading for Reading

The regional conference arrangements committee had drafted an imaginative programme of speakers, panel discussions, workshops and motions. Guests would include deputy leader Angela Rayner MP, party chair Anneliese Dodds MP and shadow Defra secretary Luke Pollard MP.

Members asked about contingency plans if Covid starts spreading again as winter approaches. Ellie said that in case social distancing is reintroduced only delegates are being guaranteed entry, but where CLPs do not send their full entitlement places will be allocated to visitors on the waitlist. The event will go ahead in person unless the government requires it to be cancelled. Following concerns from UNISON the party would look for opportunities to improve employment relations at the university.

The regional director would write to CLPs soon, inviting nominations for merit awards to be presented at the conference. Several members shared experiences of submitting applications to the national party for local stalwarts and hearing nothing back, and as an NEC member I am looking into this.

Questions were also asked about the future of the national policy forum which, even though I am the chair, I was not in a position to answer. As I said in July I think it's hard to make significant changes at this year's conference, and pointless just to tinker at the edges. Though it's unfortunate that we cannot elect regional NPF representatives in November alongside all the other positions, and that policy discussion seems to have slipped down the agenda.

Mixed Messages

As last time the CLP representative reported continuing difficulties in contacting the regional office, lack of feedback on disciplinary cases and general demoralisation. Other members spoke warmly of the service they had received and thanked regional staff for their prompt and positive support in difficult circumstances. Some of us seem to be luckier than others.

The trade union representative asked for the regional trade union liaison organisation to have sight of draft local government committee proposals before they came to the regional executive. In fact these can simply be signed off by the regional director, and as in July I asked for help in filling existing trade union vacancies.

Vince Maple was congratulated on his re-election as a south-east representative on the association of Labour councillors. He was discussing the ALC levy with HQ, and raising the impact of councillors' allowances on those claiming universal credit.

Regional Round-Up

In August Labour won a Medway council by-election, the first Labour gain in England since May. As annual conference is in our region Ellie had been in Brighton, planning events. She reported that there are 160 south-east delegates, plus visitors, and on Saturday 2 October a national campaign day would focus on themes from Keir Starmer's speech. The boundary review is proceeding: if a general election is held before 6 July 2023 it will be based on current constituencies, after that date the new boundaries take effect. Unless we start selections soon we will end up imposing dozens of candidates for the third election in a row. Sadly I have not yet managed to instil any sense of urgency into the NEC.

The importance of welcoming new members, rather than seeing them solely as leaflet deliverers, was stressed. Finally we talked about the shape of meetings coming out of the pandemic. Some local parties were planning to alternate online with in-person meetings. Hybrid meetings sound attractive but balancing access for members in the hall and members online may prove difficult, with those on a laptop at one end of the room at risk of being marginalised. Any CLP wishing to experiment must gain authorisation from the regional office, and this will not be granted for candidate selections, election of officers or AGMs, which must be wholly in-person or wholly online. It's hard to see how to combine Anonyvoter polls with secret paper ballots, but Zoom has allowed members to attend who were previously excluded because of caring duties, disability or transport issues, and it would be sad to lose their engagement.

Ann Black, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire CLPs, 16 September 2021