

NEC Update, July 2023

The next full NEC meeting is on Tuesday 25 July. Before then, here are some notes from other committee and subcommittee meetings in June and July.

National Women's Committee, 13 June 2023

Anneliese Dodds, shadow secretary of state for women and equalities, spoke and responded to comments on women's health, the gender pay gap, menopause policies, workplace harassment, the disproportionate impact on women of the cost of living, the high numbers of Black and Asian women dying in childbirth, unpaid carers, misogyny, older women, and the gender pension gap. She was thanked for all her work.

Members were still concerned that too few women were applying to stand for parliament. Some identified cost as a deterrent, with applicants believing they had to pay thousands of pounds for mediocre promotional videos. There is a cap on spending, but it is £3,500, and that does not include the cost of travel, accommodation, childcare, accessibility provision for disabled candidates, or other personal expenses. When the NEC agreed this in January 2022 I was in a minority of one in suggesting a limit of £500, with opponents saying that it would be unrealistic and unenforceable. I also suspect that more women than men are being longlisted for multiple seats, and spending time and money on all of them.

Onward to Liverpool

The national women's conference would start with a reception on the evening of Friday 6 October, followed by a full day of debate. Because total space is limited, visitors' passes could only be advertised after delegate registration closed on 23 June, and we expect more news soon. Women's committee representatives were contributing to the national policy forum process and had submitted amendments on childcare, rent, violence against women and girls, and enforcing the minimum wage.

Members asked about progress on women's branches, and information would be collected as part of reorganisation following the boundary review. Overall the women's committee is still trying to establish its role within the party, and asked for publicity in the women's newsletter. It was suggested that the new committee to be elected in October should develop an annual work programme. I proposed a rule change to fill vacancies on the committee, through runners-up for the CLP seats and elections for the trade union section, which was accepted in principle and will go to the NEC and then to annual conference. Only two of the six CLP representatives elected in 2021 remain, and though they work extremely hard, this damages the committee's balance and reduces its capacity.

Equalities Committee, 13 June 2023

The equalities committee met on the same day and there was considerable overlap with the women's committee. Anneliese Dodds gave a further report ranging across all equalities strands. Members again raised the cost of parliamentary selections, and said that private companies were selling selection packages for £10,000 and claiming an 80% success rate. Labour was also urged to seize opportunities to increase Black and other minority ethnic representation.

The chair Angela Eagle called for the committee to become more proactive in engaging with equalities issues, and countering the Tory culture wars, hysteria about "wokery" and demonisation of refugees and asylum seekers. We should seek to resolve divisions internally and trust the party to do the right thing. Others added concerns about hate crime, Islamophobia, transphobia, anti-Gypsy, Roma and Traveller racism, and the disproportionate impact of the cost of living on disabled people. The working group on the Forde report was being reconvened to take forward various issues including anti-Black racism.

Disabled and BAME members called for progress in implementing their own democratic structures agreed in 2018, but the women's organisation does not yet provide a fully functioning model. BAME Labour were seeking money for communicating with members, developing their web platform and running a programme of high-profile events and campaigning activities. I supported this as long as it was financed centrally and not from the NEC development funds which, as I reminded the committee, consist of a share of the membership income formerly returned to CLPs and ring-fenced for the use of CLPs.

Complaints and Disciplinary Sub-Committee, 4 July 2023

The committee received the usual reports. Summaries of disciplinary statistics are posted on the website at the foot of the page <https://labour.org.uk/complaints/> and July figures should be available soon.

Members were still concerned at likely under-reporting of Islamophobia and anti-Black racism and stressed that the party takes these seriously, so those affected can be confident in coming forward. The Rishi Sunak attack ad generated an unusually high volume of complaints on a single issue, interpreted by some as showing Labour's success in frightening the Tories, by others as distaste among more squeamish members, including me. However criticisms of policy or strategy are not recognised as valid complaints.

The proportion of disciplinary cases involving antisemitism was still too high at 40%, but declining. The total number of members suspended fell from 181 to 135, and efforts were now focused on the 35 who had been suspended for more than 18 months. Of those charged with supporting a proscribed organisation nearly 80% were expelled.

Appealing News

For the first time we received a report on appeals against exclusion. It is untrue that hundreds were awaiting decisions: the figure was actually 164. So far 69 had been reviewed by an independent law firm which decided whether there were valid grounds of appeal under the rules and whether the arguments submitted had any realistic prospect of success. Of these 62 were deemed to fail both criteria. The other seven were referred to the national constitutional committee which rejected them all. The remaining 95 should be dealt with shortly. However I am not convinced that an appeal process with a 100% rejection rate is a meaningful enhancement of members' rights. I have not served on any exclusion panels, so cannot comment on whether former NEC chair Alice Perry was correct when she wrote in September 2021:

"The NEC discussed the policy around proscribed organisations and rules around auto-exclusion. There was consensus around the importance of how this policy is implemented and clarity of what demonstrates support for these organisations. NEC members asked for reassurance (which was given) that "support" is more than liking social media posts."

I did ask if these exclusions would continue indefinitely as the dates of allegations recede into the past. Unease extends beyond the usual suspects, and loyal mainstream members see them as continuing the factional behaviour so deplored in the Forde report. The answer seemed to be Yes, though some felt the party should do more to rebut charges of "Stalinism". However applications to rejoin may be considered two years after expulsion, which gives people a chance to demonstrate renewed commitment.

Finally some panel decisions require members to undertake training in antisemitism. Every allowance is made for them to do this, but at some point continuing refusal would lead to ending their membership.

Organisation Committee, 4 July 2023

Following the May elections members asked for a summary of local power-sharing arrangements approved by the NEC local government panel. There were unprecedented numbers of requests, and no clear patterns had emerged. I commented that the famous tweet celebrating a Green / LibDem pact in Oxford was not the best example of "proper grown-up progressive politics" because it was actually aimed at removing a Labour councillor. I thought "progressive alliances" were intended to get rid of Tories not socialists.

All Change

Following publication of the new Westminster boundaries a handbook had been sent to CLPs detailing the next steps for reorganisation. A copy is at <http://www.annblack.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Reorganisation-handbook-for-CLPs-June-2023.pdf> and members should also keep an eye on the website at <https://labour.org.uk/activist-hub/governance-and-legal-hub/clp-hub/clp-reorganising-faq/>. Even CLPs with little or no change will have to drop previously agreed variations from the model rules and standing orders and seek fresh approval. Every CLP will also have to submit, or resubmit, their branch structures using the BranchBuilder tool by 18 August 2023. We are promised access to this, and to our new branches, by the end of July, and will need to be able to flip between old and new branches and members during transition. I am nervous about major IT system changes and tight deadlines in the middle of August, but can only hope for the best. Members also asked how local government committee boundaries would be defined where these are no longer contiguous with Westminster constituencies.

Selections

Most of the target Westminster constituencies had now selected candidates. Non-priority seats would soon start being advertised, using the streamlined procedures agreed by the NEC in May. I asked that regional executive committee members should be authorised to supervise their hustings, because requiring regional officers would make it impossible to complete selections in some regions, including the south-east with more than 60 to go.

Excluding Scotland, women had been selected in 42% of seats so far, though because the majority of current MPs are women the parliamentary party should stay close to 50%. I raised concerns at the lack of diversity among candidates for the latest five by-elections, though all but one were chosen by members. The general secretary drew attention to women and BAME MPs elected at earlier by-elections, but said that there was no room for complacency.

The committee noted a list of new and continuing campaign improvement boards, and asked for more detailed information at the next meeting. Procedures for selecting London Assembly candidates were then discussed. Sitting constituency members would be subject to trigger ballots along parliamentary lines, but sitting list members (topping up the parties to give a more proportional outcome, as in Wales and Scotland) would carry forward their position from the previous cycle. Some objected on the grounds that list members were the only elected office-holders exempt from any judgment. Others urged acceptance on technical grounds (OMOV trigger ballots for lists were complex and expensive) and political grounds (the trade unions wanted it). The paper was approved without a vote.

Finally members were urged to help in the by-elections in Selby & Ainsty and in Uxbridge & South Ruislip, both within reach but only achievable with maximum effort.

Joint Policy Committee, 5 July 2023

The first full manifesto-setting national policy forum since 2014 was just two weeks away. The committee agreed a code of conduct and operational guidelines, including changes to the rules for votes, and an outline programme.

The policy team had done a sterling job in sorting hundreds of amendments into a manageable number of categories. Much of the weekend would consist of meetings between representatives and shadow ministers to discuss individual amendments, with larger workshops in policy areas where many amendments had been submitted. All proposers and seconders would be entitled to attend, with additional participants at the discretion of the session chair.

As at previous final-stage forums the aim would be to reach consensus wherever possible, through discussion and compromise. The closing plenary session would vote on all consensus wording, with 50% of those present required for endorsement. Votes would then be held on any outstanding amendments which appeared to have significant support, with a threshold of 35% of those present and a minimum of 40 establishing an alternative position. This would go forward to conference, which would decide between the options.

So far the frontbench had not provided any alternative wording so their positions are not yet known, at least not to me. A small number of amendments were recommended for immediate acceptance, and I was slightly confused because some of these changed the wording in places also subject to amendments referred for further discussion. I hope that someone understands this better than I do! I asked for all amendments and alternative wordings to be circulated in advance to every NPF member, so we can read them on the way to Nottingham, but am not optimistic. There is so much still to do, and so many other demands, but I am sure that the desire for unity will prevail.

As usual please feel free to circulate and/or post online, and contact me at annblack50@btinternet.com / 07956-637958. Previous reports are at www.annblack.co.uk