

National Executive Committee, 23 January 2024

The meeting opened with warm tributes to Tony Lloyd, Glenys Kinnock, Derek Draper and Allan Rogers.

We then had a final update from the Forde report working group. Of Forde's 165 recommendations 154 are considered complete, and 11 are not being progressed. The enhanced member's pledge and a code of conduct for those in leadership positions have been circulated and training on Afrophobia and anti-Black racism will be rolled out soon. The staff wellbeing policy has been reviewed and all staff attend training in dignity, respect and valuing others. The web page <https://labour.org.uk/resources/the-forde-report/> will be updated with a positive narrative explaining all the excellent work that has been done.

Determined efforts were being made to reconstitute BAME Labour, providing a forum for BAME members to meet and organise. I again raised issues around party culture, where replacing one faction by another does not necessarily create a more welcoming atmosphere. There was an interesting discussion on whether factionalism is bad, or inherent in belonging to a political party. However it is unhelpful if members learn more about how to complain than how to behave. All of us are responsible for how we act ourselves, and for calling out unacceptable behaviour by others. Earlier in January local role-holders were asked about their party culture and what would improve it, and I look forward to the results. Forde's proposals for time limits within disciplinary processes, as in workplace procedures, were not accepted by the NEC, but some cases are still taking far too long, and behind every one is an individual in distress.

Ready to Roll

The rest of the meeting focused relentlessly on the coming election. General secretary David Evans opened with a video celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the first Labour government. Five by-elections in 2023 put pressure on the party but provided opportunities to learn and innovate, especially in integrating digital messages into ground operations. A recent poll showed that one in every ten voters is willing to do something to help Labour, if we could find ways to channel that support. Most staff now understood the party's goals and missions and their role in delivering them, and the fundraising team were breaking all records, with the lottery alone raising £250,000 a year. Paid-up membership was about 376,000, with a surge expected when the election is called.

More than 180 new parliamentary candidates had been selected and, together with sitting MPs, about half of all candidates were women, a real achievement when we were unable to use all-women shortlists. The 200+ non-battleground seats were now being fast-tracked, and these constituencies should get their candidates soon: feedback on the process is welcome. David was asked to expedite the Croydon East selection, and to resolve the position of those MPs currently outside the parliamentary party. Where candidates had disturbing experiences during selections he was happy for them to contact him directly.

The Rules of the Game

David promised to bring the party's scheme of delegated powers to a future meeting. He stressed that he had no authority except through the NEC, to which he, senior staff and NEC officers were accountable, seeking approval in advance where possible, otherwise reporting afterwards. Scrutiny and oversight were vital in reassuring the party that everyone abided by the rules at all times.

NEC members asked about the impact of new requirements for postal votes, and about the 2.2 million British citizens living abroad and now entitled to vote, with the Conservatives allegedly hiring people to channel them into key marginals. Overseas voters are hard to reach systematically, though I know that Labour International are doing what they can. Requiring a national insurance number for postal votes will undoubtedly disenfranchise some voters.

Ellie Reeves, deputy national campaign co-ordinator, commented wryly that the Tories seemed to want to fight the general election one by-election at a time, with more in the pipeline. She introduced the new branding for all material, and outlined support for incumbent MPs working in twinned seats. Members raised devolution-proofing for Scotland and Wales, concerns about Gaza and the Middle East, the Connects print software, and working harmoniously with council Labour groups.

Be Prepared

Campaign director Morgan McSweeney stressed that we could not let Tory chatter about 14 November lull us into thinking there was plenty of time. Even if Rishi Sunak did not lose control of his fractious and divided party, many signs pointed to 2 May. National insurance cuts would take effect in January, the budget is earlier than usual, the Lords February recess has been cancelled to try to push the Rwanda bill through, and money is pouring into digital spend and direct mail. In any case there will definitely be council, police and crime commissioner and mayoral elections on 2 May, many of which are in Westminster battleground seats. Some members pointed out that the Tories would not want the general election to follow disastrous local results, and this also indicated May.

Morgan warned that Conservatives would try to make the election a referendum on Labour. Instead voters had to imagine how they would feel if they woke up on 3 May to find, after 14 years, yet another Tory government. The Tories have failed, the country needs change, Labour has changed, and Labour has a long-term plan to change the country. Resources would be allocated to where they were most needed within the must-win seats, and kept constantly under review.

Several members raised the drastic defunding of local councils since 2010, with national Tory governments devolving blame for cuts to essential services while surreptitiously raising taxes more than any previous parliament. Labour's position is that working people should pay less tax, but inheritance tax cuts would benefit only the richest few. Ending non-dom tax status and charging VAT on private school fees showed the shadow chancellor's priorities. I like the more general "tax fairly and spend wisely", and wish we could rehabilitate tax as the contribution that we all make to a civilised society, but appreciate that the nuances might get lost in what will be a very ugly campaign.

High Spirits

Angela Rayner and Keir Starmer had parliamentary duties for most of the day, but Angela joined us for the last session. She thanked the unions for their support, especially in recent by-elections and warned that polls could narrow and victory was not guaranteed. In a whirlwind report she covered Tata Steel, where Labour would keep production going, fair funding for local government based on need, school absenteeism, RAAC (concrete) problems, council housing, rental reform and homelessness. In the Middle East all hostages must be released, with a sustainable ceasefire and a two-state solution. Labour opposed the economic activity of public bodies bill (the "anti-boycott bill") where the government were playing politics with legislation not fit for purpose. She had met the Chief Rabbi and would represent the party at Holocaust Memorial Day. Closest to her heart, she wanted to pass the new deal for working people in the first hundred days of government. She responded to comments on the Post Office scandal, procurement policies and shortages of skilled builders and electricians, and the meeting ended on a wave of positivity and determination.

Committee Round-Up

January also saw a number of subcommittee meetings, and brief notes are below. Please feel free to contact me for more information.

Complaints and Disciplinary Subcommittee, 16 January 2024

Gurinder Singh Josan was re-elected as chair, and the vice-chair will be elected at the next meeting.

Complaints had risen during the last few months, and additional staff were allocated to ensure that they were assessed promptly. The proportion of those investigated as valid continued at around 12%. The other 88% were not followed up for a variety of reasons: some related to policy positions, some were multiple complaints about the same post, some asked again about an existing complaint or disagreed with a decision, some were about non-members, and some were likely to lead to minimal sanctions even if true. I suggested explaining the criteria for valid complaints on the website, but there was concern that this might discourage members and the party could miss legitimate concerns. Anyone experiencing any form of harassment or discrimination should be confident that they will be taken seriously.

Reports on disciplinary outcomes are published at the foot of the Complaints page <https://labour.org.uk/resources/complaints/> - the most recent is from November 2023 and I expect that January 2024 will be uploaded soon. For NEC disciplinary panels held last year 38% of members were expelled, suspended or referred to the NCC (national constitutional committee) or the ICB (independent complaints board), 34% received a formal warning or a reminder of conduct, and 28% a reminder of values or no further action. For exclusion panels in 2023 82% of allegations were upheld, with most expelled and a few suspended or immediately readmitted. Of 130 members currently suspended, 37% had been suspended for more than 18 months. Most of these are still under investigation or awaiting an NCC or ICB hearing, but one-third have failed to complete training required by the NEC. If the latter group refuse to engage, they will at some point have to be returned to the disciplinary process.

Organisation committee, 16 January 2024

The committee received a report on the chair's decisions since the last meeting, including, exceptionally, NEC shortlisting for a Labour group leader in one council.

There was a further update on Westminster selections, and the NEC would shortlist for the remaining "non-battleground" seats soon. This could provide an opportunity to increase diversity among candidates. While many applicants were enthusiastic about the local area, campaigning efforts must be ruthlessly focused on the seats which Labour needs to form a government. However not everyone can take time to travel to their twinned constituency and we should also value the contribution of members who could only work in their own ward, some of whom would live in key council areas.

Several members raised the difficulties of CLPs in special measures, where significant progress is unlikely before the general election. It was explained that "special measures" only refers to additional verification for people applying to join the party, and some of these, for instance Feltham & Heston, are able to meet normally. The main problem is where the CLP is suspended as well, and the committee agreed that it was important for members to gather, even on an informal basis, if they were to be motivated to campaign. Regions would be asked to look at facilitating this, where possible within available resources.

NEC Development Fund Panel, 19 January 2024

A working group to look into the scope and functioning of the fund was agreed, including myself and Ellie Reeves who as a former CLP representative was there when the current framework was negotiated. This is timely as a number of bids did not seem to have involved the local party. The form states that awards will only be paid to the official CLP bank account, and overlooking this can lead to problems. The application pack also says that the fund is "not intended to support the everyday workings of a local party such as postage, leaflets, direct mail or digital advertising spend". However clearer guidance should be provided to CLPs, including the level of detail expected. After the panel secretary obtained more information, grants were approved for the majority of individual applications.

In addition the fund will pay for the recruitment and deployment of additional trainee organisers through to the general election, and for significant enhancement of the party's digital technology tools, so they are robust, secure, solutions-focused, simple and pleasant to use with the highest levels of support, including support outside office hours. I'm sure this will be widely welcomed, and asked for consultation to ensure that what the party plans to deliver will meet the needs of role-holders.

National women's committee, 25 January 2024

The committee is now back to full strength following elections at the women's conference and Sagal Abdi-Wale was elected as chair, with Ruth Hayes and Kathryn Salt as vice-chairs.

Ellie Reeves gave a presentation on general election strategy. She asked for help in mobilising women members, and referenced a successful training event for women in Beckenham & Penge. Anneliese Dodds then reported, highlighting her Fabian pamphlet <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/equal-footing/> which argued that women's equality was an economic as well as a moral issue. She was working with Frances O'Grady and Rachel Reeves on workplace issues including the gender pay gap, part-time working and occupational segregation. Members asked if International Women's Day could be used to promote the new deal for working people, as the many excellent policies need to be taken out to a wider audience.

Continuing issues included national women's conference and women's branches. For 2024 the women's conference will again be in Liverpool on the Saturday before annual conference, and I asked for space for visitors to be fully utilised. A longstanding request for a standalone conference in 2025 should be considered by the women's committee before the NEC decides. A recent survey reported that there are 160 women's branches, though this might include duplicates. Some local parties have chosen to keep their informal women's forums, but others have experienced difficulties in setting up women's branches and, for instance, been told that the quorum for women's branch meetings must be higher than the quorum for meetings of the whole CLP.

All this should have been resolved many months ago, with clear, consistent advice from every level of the party, so that local women's organisations are free to look outwards and mobilise for campaigning, rather than find themselves bogged down in bureaucracy and worse. In addition the women's committee is not sufficiently integrated with the NEC framework. I participate as the NEC vice-chair for women, all women on the NEC are entitled to attend, and the NWC minutes should go to the NEC for information, but the links could be stronger and more productive.

Equalities Committee, 25 January 2024

This committee also asked for closer relationships with the NEC. In olden days – before 2018 – the main subcommittees met two weeks before the full NEC and could feed into it through their minutes, rather than two days after, when key decisions have already been made. The equalities committee also used to receive detailed diversity statistics on selections and be consulted on everything else within its remit, and the chair Angela Eagle would pursue this.

Anneliese Dodds stressed that equality was fundamental to all Keir Starmer's missions. As well as her work for women she had held discussions at the RNIB (royal national institute of blind people) and was liaising with the Labour Muslim Network. She would take concerns about work capability assessments and other anti-disability measures back to Liz Kendall, but emphasised the difference between the parties: the Tories believed that lots of disabled people could work and chose not to, while Labour would open doors and remove barriers for everyone who wanted to work and was not able to. Members also asked that a code of conduct on homophobia should be developed urgently.

There was a further discussion of BAME Labour, and some questioned whether to continue with the existing constitution, agreed by the NEC in November 2022, or write a new one. Progress and a date for an AGM were expected soon, but there are lessons from the national women's organisation which could perhaps save time and energy better spent on campaigning to elect a Labour government. Structures are there to facilitate action; they should never be an end in themselves

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