

82nd Women's TUC, Conference Report 14th-16th March 2012

Every Woman in Every Workplace, Stronger Together.

Introduction

The MU delegation consisted of: Lyndsey Hardiman, Elena Piras, Kathy Dyson, Barbara White and Hattie Bennet.

The conference this year focused on the disproportionate effect of the Tory policies and cuts on women and how women trades unionists across the country are supporting each other and fighting back.

- Women are more likely to lose their jobs as the majority (65 per cent) of public sector workers are women.
- Women will lose more in cuts to benefits. The Shadow Minister for Women, Yvette Cooper MP, has shown that of the £8bn net revenue to be raised by the financial year 2014–15, nearly £6bn will be from women, in contrast with just over £2bn from men.
- Women will be hardest hit by cuts to public services. The Women's Budget Group has shown that the groups that will suffer the greatest reduction in their standard of living due to cuts in public services are lone parents and single pensioners, the majority of whom are women.
- Women are the majority of those providing unpaid care so are likely to be the ones picking up the pieces as social care services are cut.
- Loss of tax credits and pay freezes in 2011/12 added up to £32.37bn, £1.73bn or 73% of which was borne by women.
- Women have lost 800,000 jobs already, in the public sector.
- An estimated £1.68bn of tax is avoided by large corporations, each year - enough to more than cover the deficit and the government is proposing to scrap the 50% tax rate for top earners.
- Over 1.1m women are now out of work- the highest figure for 20 years. The number of unemployed women between the ages of 50-64 has risen by 20,000 in the last quarter.

- Maternity rights are under attack with plans to reduce paid maternity leave from 26 to 18 weeks.
- The Equalities and Human Rights Commission is facing cuts and closure at the behest of the Beecroft report and hard won equalities legislation is therefore under threat, in the name of reducing red tape.
- The state education system is being privatised, indeed, Gove has been renamed the Minister for Free Schools and Academies. Privatised state schools are being given more funding and do not have to teach the national curriculum, honour current national pay and conditions for teachers or give facilities time for trades union activities.
- 61% of teachers want to leave the profession and there is a 30% decrease in applicants for teacher training, due to government criticism of teachers and interference with their work.
- Pensions are under threat across the board with workers having to work longer, pay more and receive in the end.
- Cuts of £400m to the legal aid budget have a disproportionate effect on women, especially in the areas of domestic violence and family law. These cuts will remove @650,00 people from the scope for receiving assistance for legal fairness.
- Malnutrition costs the NHS over £13bn a year, twice that of obesity and is on the rise, due to benefit cuts, pensioner poverty and low family incomes. In addition, food banks are increasing in a country that is the fifth wealthiest in the world.
- The Tory government plans to cut £35bn from the transport budget and train companies are responding by cutting jobs of support staff in stations, conductors on trains and platform staff. There are many health and safety issues as a result and also fares are likely to increase again again targeting commuters with a 'Super-Peak' fare.

Motions to conference, covered all of these areas, plus women over 50 in the workplace who are losing their jobs in the cuts and finding it difficult to get another; the correlation between breast cancer and working night shifts and the

need for both employers and women in general to be aware of the risks, provide better screening and alternate shifts with daylight working; violence against women journalists, the under-representation of women in public life, on the media as presenters, and on company boards (only 12.5% in 2011) which the MU seconded; the effect of climate change on the 70% of the poor who are made up of women globally and their lack of access to resources and decision-making processes; women in Afghanistan, Egypt and the Far East and what oppression they still face despite recent revolutions.

Motions that were specifically relevant to women musicians were:

- ◆ The impact of the global financial crisis on freelance work and the pressure on funding sources;
- ◆ A lack of role models in the media;
- ◆ The low numbers of women on boards who make arts funding decisions;
- ◆ Privatisation and cuts to state education via government and local authorities impacting directly on music education.
- ◆ The safety of women musicians on the public transport system at night especially when increasing numbers of station platforms and trains likely to be unmanned.
- ◆ The costs of public (and private) transport when fares and petrol costs continue to rise and fees for gigs are stagnant or falling.
- ◆ Cuts to childcare provision affect women musician's ability work as both performers and teachers.
- ◆ The costs of accessing music education at every level are increasing, but especially at HE level where from 2012m fees of £9,000 are to be charged for conservatoire provision.
- ◆ Women continue to earn less than men throughout their lives and female graduates earn less than male graduates. Three and a half years after graduating, 22 per cent of men earn more than £30,000 compared to only 12 per cent of women. The London Economics Consultancy has estimated that 70–80 per cent of women students will not be able to pay off their student loans in the thirty years after they graduate.

High Points

A panel discussion about 'Every Woman Safe Everywhere' report where Vera Baird QC who wrote it, spoke eloquently and inspirationally about the effects of cuts to legal aid on women who are victims of domestic violence. She said that rapid changes instigated by the Tories in the areas of local commissioning services, NHS, local authority funding cuts had caused chaos in local strategic planning which meant that most decisions were made on the basis of cost

rather than need. She also made the excellent point that women should put themselves forward for leadership roles more, in order to represent women's interests better. She was herself standing as a police commissioner, for that reason and urged other women to do the same. As a lawyer she stated that local authorities are not legally required in European law to tender for public services at the lowest cost- a practice which is causing havoc.

Claudia Meenal, from the ETUC described their current campaign called 'Impact and Resistance' understanding that corporations see politicians as puppets to be removed at will, if they do not support their agendas. This is especially clear in the technocratic governance of Greece and Italy, that both disempowers the people and makes a mockery of democracy. She emphasised, as did many others, that the trades union movement is the only voice for the alternative that puts people and the planet first, and spoke well on the need to renew the social contract and reassert the political and social power of the people.

The SERTUC Fringe meeting was also inspiring: Frances O'Grady stressed the importance of working together and also of the women's vote, providing evidence that the Tories were sensitive to the fact that many of their cuts and policies negatively affected women and may threaten them at the next election. Gloria Mills emphasised the need to keep fighting and the fact that trades union movement was founded in hard times and needs to get tough again.

Finally, there was a short film of thanks and solidarity from Liliany Obando a Columbian trades unionist who was finally released after four years imprisonment after sustained international protest from Justice for Columbia and the TUC.

WTUC and the MU

It was obvious again that with the major issues affecting women described above, the arts and culture agenda is being lost or generally neglected. We need to continue to find effective ways to promote the value of arts and culture firstly to the trade union movement and then to the wider public in a way that has impact and is politically, socially and culturally influential.

Kathy Dyson April 2012