



Leaders scared of opposition

IT was a pretty frustrating week; but it also showed how terrified the leadership are of opposition. If they are still afraid of us, then we can still fight and win, so now is not the time to give up but to organise!

Saturday: Compositing meetings, where the resolutions from trade unions and local Labour Parties are put together into composites to go before conference. They are a great opportunity for the leadership to bully and intimidate delegates into conveniently "losing" awkward parts of resolutions, such as setting a figure for the minimum wage.

Sunday: A new addition to the conference timetable — regional delegates' briefings, where delegates were told by regional officials how to vote when they got into conference. The leadership must be really worried about the pensions issue because they sent Harriet Harman round to all the delegates' briefings to persuade people to vote with the leadership. She told at least one delegates' briefing that it was all right to break their mandate from their local Labour Parties.

Monday: A number of delegates moved "reference back" to allow resolutions which had been ruled out of order to be debated. Nine emergency resolutions on the trade union link had been ruled out because apparently media reports do not constitute an "event". Unfortunately the "references back" were voted down, mainly because the ruled out resolutions were not printed on the order paper and many delegates did not have a clue what was going on.

Debate was very bland and uneventful. A few years ago you could get to speak just by putting your hand up, and even last year a few delegates got in unscripted. This year speakers were hand picked and in many cases had their speeches written for them by party officials. The chair wouldn't take anyone who opposes the NEC line. Parliamentary candidates were given priority over delegates who were actually here representing people.

It was especially a shame that there

was no debate on Monday, because on the agenda were health, the economy and rights at work. The vote on re-nationalisation of the public utilities was very close, but unfortunately went narrowly for the leadership.

The day ended with the announcement of the NEC ballot results. All the Socialist Campaign Group Candidates increased their votes on last year, and a great cheer was heard for Dennis Skinner when his vote was announced. Harriet Harman's vote was down significantly on last year, surely a reaction against her decision to send her son to an opt-out grammar school.

Tuesday: The debates this morning were deathly dull: Europe and women's representation. The only discussion of interest centred on whether a Labour Government should repeal the Tories' Disability Discrimination Act. This debate saw the first signs of the conference being disgruntled at how few ordinary delegates were taken to speak, and the vote on this resolution was very close.

In the afternoon it was the leader's speech. Unlike some other left wing delegates I stayed in the hall. It was very noticeable that what got the most applause in Blair's speech was things like housing the homeless, comprehensive education, trade union rights at GCHQ and a minimum wage. The nationalist stuff at the end of his speech was received much more ambivalently, and his references to "Labour's coming home" (like the English football team) certainly antagonised some Scottish delegates.

Wednesday: The first debate was transport. My own union general secretary, Jimmy Knapp, tried to get the RMT's resolution on re-nationalisation of the railways debated in conference. The vote was very close, but the chair ruled it lost, so we got a resolution on the railways which was a lot more wishy-washy and accepted that a Labour government will allow the franchises to run to their ends and won't immediately re-nationalise Railtrack.

There were two other debates of interest: education and pensions. Well, that's if you could call them debates. In the "open debate" sections, after the resolutions had been moved and seconded it was a great rarity to hear a speaker against the platform, although of course Barbara Castle made a much better speech than Harriet Harman on pensions. There were lots of people with party staff badges at the back of the hall clapping Harriet Harman when no-one else did.

Thursday: It's strange how the result of the card vote on the pensions resolution was known and publicised in the media before it was announced to conference this morning. The main controversy today was on defence. The resolution to scrap Trident, traditionally an area where the leadership don't always get their way, was voted down — but only narrowly.

The draft manifesto document was voted on without being moved or discussed at all. When challenged on this, the chair said that conference had been debating sections of it all week, and so it did not need to be debated separately.

Friday: We got the result of the card vote on the manifesto document and it was over 90% in favour. Now the members will be asked, in an OMOV ballot, to endorse something that they will not even see in full, never mind get the chance to amend.

This morning's resolutions were all very important ones on party structures and the sovereignty of conference and local democratic bodies. They were deliberately placed on Friday morning so that many delegates would have gone home. The chair was struggling to find speakers from the floor in the open debates, but even so there was no chance she would take anybody she knew to be left wing. General secretary Tom Sawyer gave bland assurances about keeping conference sovereignty and the trade unions' 50% voting weight, and Stevie Stevenson of the TGWU-EPIU agreed to remit the motion.

A CLP delegate