

A Social Work Perspective on Conference

The tragic death of 'Baby Peter' has led to a number of motions on Social Work in Children's services being tabled at this year's conference. The main focus is quite rightly on the pressures facing Social Workers on the frontline, particularly around caseload levels (unmanageably high) and a business model where tick boxes and targets are more important than direct work with children and families.

Unison already has a 10 point plan for protecting vulnerable children drawn from the experience of frontline workers. It is very good, and if implemented would do a lot to protect children e.g. joint visits, lower caseload levels which are agreed nationally and independently inspected etc. But the union has no plan for how we would fight for this to be implemented beyond just to giving it to government and hoping for the best. A real campaign would have to include a serious recruitment and organising drive within Children's services. An amendment (20.01) has gone in arguing that the leadership needs to organise such a strategy, support branches in fighting for implementation of this plan, support social workers in dispute and encourage branches to link up over these issues.

The major threat in adult Social Care is the national rollout of individual care budgets i.e. 'Personalisation'. This means that

a certain amount of money will be assigned to you depending on how many boxes you tick, (huge focus on self-assessment so literally YOU tick) and you will be encouraged (pressurised) into taking this money and basically sorting yourself out. You become an employer; hire a personal assistant, job done! You can have a bit of help but you have to pay and when you run out of money that's it...unless of course you can 'self-fund'.

Well that's the theory, practice is obviously different and all the pilots have suggested there are huge problems with this model even apart from the reasoning behind it. Some people (research suggests particularly young people with physical disabilities) do enjoy the control that choosing their own workers (PA's) gives them. But there are many ways in which service users can decide how, when and what support they can have by having a flexible service provided by well paid, trained and motivated staff where workers and users can develop services together. As you can imagine that isn't on the government's or Unison's agenda. Unison's rhetoric on this is that we don't want a "one size fits all" approach, fine in as far as it goes, but not enough. By supporting amendment 13.02 we can start to take some positive action on this and provide an alternative to the introduction of this micro market in care.

Politics for All!

The political crisis, gains for the BNP, and the threat of a Tory government all demand action from UNISON. Facing the most extensive public sector cuts since the 70s it's failed to use its voice to call for an end to PFI, privatisation etc. which see millions of pounds wasted each year. The union has also failed to call on Labour MPs to stand down in light of the expenses scandal. The Labour Link has been a one way street with UNISON tailing the New Labour line rather than asserting its own members' interests against the orthodoxy that the market knows best.

Whilst the review of the political fund progresses and the Labour Link remains open it should be used. The union should demand, an emergency Labour conference, that is "properly open", meaning it can debate political motions from unions and local Labour Parties, and take decisions which bind the leadership. The union should insist on rescinding the Bournemouth decision that banned such motions. Unison activists should demand the opening-up of the unions' political decision making to rank-and-file discussion and control. We should call for an open debate on working-class representation (of the sort the RMT has done), working to remove the barriers to union political activity most members face. What is now in the hands of a few, who claim to be the political voice of the union, should be the common property of all.

About Workers' Liberty

These bulletins, produced every day for delegates at UNISON conferences, are written by UNISON members who are also supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, a revolutionary Marxist group active across the labour movement and internationally. Our aim is to rebuild and rearm the workers' movement with the tools and ideas necessary to re-make the world. If you find the bulletins useful why not help us distribute them, write for them, and join the Alliance for Workers' Liberty?