

Health Conference backing for Dudley strikes

Mark New, *Dudley UNISON Secretary reports on the union's Health Conference.*

The decision by UNISON Health Service Group Executive not to oppose two motions from the Dudley branch at Health Group Conference in Cardiff this week came as a welcome surprise.

It opens the door to a long-overdue effective national opposition to PFI backed by the strength of our union. Up until now we have had to fight on our own, with sympathy and financial support from around the country but without other groups of health workers joining us in large numbers on demonstrations or launching their own industrial disputes. We did not expect this support from the Exec because until the last minute, we underestimated the degree to which our strike was resonating at the rank and file level of Conference delegates.

But in reality, a confrontation with Dudley strikers would have been very damaging and the union leadership, to its credit, appears to have recognised this fact. The Dudley branch had submitted two motions to the Cardiff conference and on Wednesday it looked like both would fall off the agenda. We considered challenging Standing Orders but decided that it would be better to get an active response from the floor than to seek a 2/3 majority for a procedural move. We did not know that the Executive intended to withdraw their objections and give qualified support to our motions.

The Emergency motion called on Health Group to launch a national advertising campaign to explain that PFI is privatisation of the National Health Service, including detail of the Dudley scheme with the loss of 70 beds, the increase in cost from £65 to £120 million,

and the 40 year commitment to put profits before patients. Such a campaign would have to be financed through the General Political Fund (GPF) and we had amended our own motion so that UNISON would call on the GPF to do this. We had no idea whether Standing Orders would allow the amendment or rule it out.

The amended motion now commits the union, should the Trust sign the PFI contracts, to send a delegation including strikers to see Health Ministers at the Dept. of Health, informing them that UNISON will be approaching the GPF to launch an advertising campaign, and calling on them to resolve the dispute in favour of the strikers' just demands, reversing the Trust decision.

The second motion calls for a national campaign to involve the entire membership in a strategy to combat PFI, including:

- continuing to issue publicity materials and information, to win the public argument
- A national day of action against PFI
- a national demonstration against PFI at a date chosen for maximum political effect
- strike action

This open-ended motion was originally opposed by the Executive, whose amendment would have retained the status quo so that each affected branch is forced to fight on its own.

Just as I was about to propose the main motion, UNISON President Adrian Dilworth informed Conference that the Health Group Executive had decided to accept it with the qualification that any national demo would be properly organised and given plenty of time to mobilise.

We regard this as a big step forward, reflecting the real groundswell from delegates.

The mood was deceptive, because earlier that day a few dozen were left isolated on the floor when they rose to heckle Labour Health Minister John Denham. But at least one third of Conference declined to applaud him, and the Labour Party loyalists had to plant supportive questions to give the appearance of support for the Minister.

Chair Veronica Dunn then attacked various Conference delegates for failing to show the proper respect for an invited guest. I attempted to speak but was not called in the debate. But to wide and loud applause North West Regional Health Chair Frances Kelly demanded to know from John Denham when the Labour Government would show some respect for low paid healthworkers instead of imposing PFI and selling them off like a tin of beans.

At the end of the day people streamed up to say they would have prevented the close of Conference by refusing to leave if the Dudley motions had not been reached.

After 135 days on strike, we know very well that Conference debate is one thing, winning a long hard industrial dispute is another. But we came away feeling a corner has been turned for all those fighting PFI. Not before time.

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