

## BIRO Seminar – Sheffield – 2016

This year's Biro Seminar started with a clarion call for all Unison members to campaign hard to persuade this Tory Government to drop the Trade Union Bill. The Bill, described as "not fit for purpose" by the government's own red tape watchdog the Regulatory Policy Committee, is unnecessary and will damage partnership working between employers and trade unions.

Nick Crook, Head of International Relations kicked off the proceedings reminding us of our role as Branch International Relations' Officers, before introducing the speaker for the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Our task, amongst many is to co-ordinate the branch's work on international relations, to ensure the branch members are informed of national policy on international matters, to encourage members to be aware of the importance of international solidarity issues within the context of the overall work of the union and to encourage members of the branch to take action and participate in international solidarity activities organised nationally or regionally. Here are some of the main campaigns highlighted during the weekend.

### Palestine Solidarity Campaign

Hugh Lanning, Chair, of the PSC preceded his talk with a famous quote.

*"We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians." Nelson Mandela.*

The PSC campaigns for peace & Justice for Palestinians, in support of international law and human rights and against all forms of racism. PSC is an independent and democratic organisation which represents people in Britain from all faiths, political parties and backgrounds, to campaign for Palestinian rights, including the right to self-determination and the right of return, and to oppose Israel's occupation and violations of international law. Palestinian families, especially in East Jerusalem, are being forced out by a variety of means, from settler takeover of homes to demolitions to pseudo-legal tactics. Israel has taken control of the scarce water resources in the West Bank. Many Palestinians now have to buy back their water from the settlements. Homes are being destroyed and thousands of olive and fruit trees uprooted. A UN resolution of 2004 backing a judgement of the International Court of Justice, called on Israel to remove the Wall and to compensate the Palestinians for their losses. It continues to be ignored. You can help by sending a postcard from: [www.palestinecampaign.org/sign-our-greetings-from-our-palestine-postcard/](http://www.palestinecampaign.org/sign-our-greetings-from-our-palestine-postcard/)



## Justice for Columbia

Hasan Dodwell, Justice for Columbia and participants in the recent Unison delegation to Columbia gave moving, and, emotional accounts of their time and first-hand experiences to this most violence place on earth for Trade Unionists. 3,000 activists have been killed in the past 30 years. Many receive death threats and are usually imprisoned. Workers in public and private sectors are hit by brutal anti-union policies making it almost impossible to join a union. Unison's commitment to solidarity with Columbian workers has been unwavering. Together with Justice for Columbia, Unison has helped secure the release of several high profile political prisoners, has forced the British government to stop ignoring Columbia's human rights crisis, and has solidified solidarity links at a national, regional and branch level with public sector unions in Columbia. Dave Prentis, General Secretary of Unison says

*"Supporting workers in Columbia is one of Unison's international priorities. We are extremely proud to work alongside Justice for Columbia to support our Columbian brothers and sisters in their struggle for trade union rights, for peace, and for social justice. I would urge all our branches to affiliate to the campaign."*

**Remember:** 3,000 trade unionists killed since 1986. 95% of cases not brought to justice. Still at least 20 killed every year. 5 million people violently forced to flee their homes. Still at least 200,000 displaced annually. Still at least 4,000 political prisoners including trade unionists, community activists and students locked up.

## Qatar

Unison is calling on Qatar to overhaul its employment system, including abolishing the Kafala system of sponsorship (In essence, the **kafala system** is the relationship binding employee to the employer, which has often been criticised as "slave-like". Unison is also calling for Qatar, and other Gulf states that rely heavily on migrant labour, to respect workers' rights, including the right to freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining as laid down in international treaties. Unison is working with others, including the TUC and human rights organisations, to raise awareness of the plight of migrant workers across the Gulf states, especially in Qatar as it prepares to host the World Athletics Championship in 2019 and the World Cup in 2022. Get involved in the Playfair Qatar campaign <http://playfairqatar.org.uk>

The above were the main campaigns for this BIRO Seminar, but there are many others besides. I hope that all unison members back at branch can see the importance of supporting these issues and campaigns and getting involved and how they all relate to us as trade unionists and fellow human beings. Our struggles at home are the same struggles in other countries for our fellow trade unionists and they desperately need our help and support and we should not let them down, besides, we never know when we might need their help and support at some point in the future – Unity is strength. United we stand, divided we fall. Clichés, maybe, but these stock phrases have stood the test of time!

For further information on the work of BIRO, go to: <https://www.unison.org.uk/about/what-we-do/working-internationally/>



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