

## **Unison's International Seminar 2017 Report**

The annual weekend Branch International Relations Officers (BIRO) Seminar this year was held at Unison's own holiday resort at Croyde Bay. I could meet up once more with familiar faces and make new acquaintances with other Biro's from across the UK with a like-minded aim in mind to highlight the international issues important to Unison and to forge and build union networks both here and in those countries included on the agenda.

Some Unison members may question the role of the International Relations Officer within the West Sussex Branch, South East Region that I represent. They may say that the branch should concentrate on local issues, solely. Unison can be rightly proud of its long history of international work. Unison is known both in the UK and globally as a union that has an international perspective on all areas of its work from organising the fight against privatisation and the defence of employment and trade union rights. The driving forces of the neo-liberal economic model behind privatisation and out-sourcing, cuts in public spending and taxation, the driving down of workers and trade union rights are global. Unison has no option but to respond to these threats by working internationally as part of the European and international trade union movement.

### **Introduction**

The refrain throughout the weekend was global solidarity is at the heart of our union. Fighting internationally makes us stronger. Injury to one is an injury to all. As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) moves to privatise water, water is a human right; was the clarion call to delegates. Friday 31<sup>st</sup> March was 'International Transgender Day of Visibility'. So, a cornucopia of issues for us to consider before we had even started the seminar in earnest. The international committee agrees the agenda, which was as follows.

### **Swaziland**

Wandile Dlodlu from the Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF) began by saying that Swaziland is the only absolute monarchy in Africa. The Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF) was formed in 2008 to coordinate and unite the efforts of the democratic movement in Swaziland and subsequently attempt to expand its political space. The existing space for protest action is currently limited to the unions, who have secured themselves this space through the Industrial Act. Since the unions are member organizations of the SUDF, the SUDF is therefore in a strong position to expand the space for this type of action. It is understood that the SUDF and its member organisations would benefit from further funds from other international donors. This would not only enable the leadership to concentrate on the issues at hand, but could also help strengthen one of the fundamental reasons for the consciousness boost in Swaziland. However, whatever happens in the future, the role of the SUDF is too important to let it crumble. If this were to happen, it will take years if not longer to build another unified front. I am hopeful that my branch members will want to affiliate to ACTSA. ACTSA was established in 1994 as the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) in response to the changed context of Southern Africa. Some of ACTSA's key achievements since 1994 are;

- Helped secure £7.5 million in compensation for asbestos sufferers in southern Africa.
- Supported the people of Zimbabwe in their struggle for rights and development.
- Campaigned against poverty, denial of rights and for political freedom in Swaziland.
- Delivered over seven million sanitary products to women in Zimbabwe as part of our Dignity Period campaign.
- Promoted gender equality and the advancement of women throughout southern Africa.
- Successfully supported Zambia getting millions more in increased revenue from mining companies operating in the country.

### **Global Supply Chains**

Several speakers spoke about the global supply chains, how ethical procurement can make a difference to peoples' lives. Groups involved with this campaign are Anti-Slavery International, Banana Link, Electronics Watch, Global Justice Now, Labour Behind the Label, War on Want.

I would like branch members to find out whether their respective employers have an ethical code of conduct on ethical procurement. Do they have 'Fairtrade Status'? Would members of Unison branches affiliate to Electronic Watch? Why affiliate? For public sector buyers, affiliate to Electronics Watch helps protect the rights and safety of electronics workers around the world and to achieve your own goals for socially responsible and sustainable procurement. Ethical procurement is 'the assumption of responsibility of a company for the labour and human rights practices in its supply chain'. The ethics of procuring places a responsibility on buyers to ensure that workers at any of the stages of production of the goods brought do not suffer abuses at work.

### **Palestine**



Betty Hunter, Honorary President of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) opened her speech with a declaration for the self-determination for Palestinians. 50 Years of occupation. Palestine Solidarity

Campaign (PSC) is a community of people working together for peace, equality, and justice and against racism, occupation, and colonisation. The PLC is united in its belief that Israel's flouting of international law, continued military occupation of Palestine, and systematic discrimination against Palestinians is unacceptable; so, together, we are taking action. We must remind ourselves that over 500, 000 settlers live in illegal Israeli settlements build on Palestinian land. Over 5 million Palestinians are forced to live as refugees, exiled and denied the right to return their homeland. The ethnic cleansing by Israel continues and Palestine is disappearing. The predominant graffiti on the walls of Palestine sums up the pledge of the Palestinian people. "To Exist is to Resist!" Nelson Mandela once said, "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."

### **Columbia**

Established in 2002 by the British trade union movement, Justice for Columbia (JFC) was created in response to the appalling human rights crisis in Colombia, and particularly the abuses committed against trade unionists and other civil society actors. Though our core backing continues to come predominantly from the trade unions, JFCs support base has expanded to include the legal profession, the student movement and numerous politicians, journalists and academics and we now also have a chapter in the Republic of Ireland JFC Ireland and supporters in several other European countries.

International pressure, including from JFC, has led to some improvements in the situation in Colombia although in other areas, the situation has deteriorated and Colombia remains the most dangerous place on earth in which to be a trade unionist or a human rights defender. 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. Many Columbian trade unionists have travelled to Unison events and numerous Unison members have themselves travelled to Columbia to witness the reality first-hand.

### **Qatar**

Under the heading of Qatar: Championing the rights of migrant workers, we shared a skype linkup with a panel based in Doha. The panel comprised representatives from the Building and Woodworkers International (BWI) global union and Filipino construction workers based in Qatar.

Migrants from Bangladesh, India and Nepal working on the refurbishment of the showcase Khalifa Stadium and landscaping the surrounding gardens and sporting facilities known as the "Aspire Zone" are being exploited. Some are being subjected to forced labour. They cannot change jobs, they cannot leave the country and they often wait months to be paid. Meanwhile, FIFA (football's global governing body), its sponsors and the construction companies involved are set to make massive financial gains from the tournament. If workers complain about their conditions or seek help, they are often intimidated and threatened by their employers. As one migrant worker on Khalifa Stadium told us, "I went to the company office, telling the manager I wanted to go home [back to my country] because always my pay is late. The manager screamed at me saying 'keep working or you will never leave!'"

Mohammad, who maintains green spaces in the Aspire Zone said, "The Company has my passport. If my sponsorship status changes they will send me back and I have a lot of debt to pay..., I want my passport back... [and] the camp is no good, there are eight of us in one room ... it is too many. But I cannot complain [because] they will end my job."

### **Turkey: Human & Workers' Rights**

Oktaý Sahbaz and Steve Sweeney from the Solidarity with the People of Turkey (SPOT) spoke for the first time at a BIRO Seminar regarding Turkey. The ruling Justice and Development (AKP) Party have used the failed coup attempt last July to sweep trade unionists, Kurds, and left-wingers out of the public sector, especially education and the media. In some ways, this latest wave of attacks is a testament to the rise of those calling for a new Turkey. Unable to tackle the rise of political opposition parties such as the HDP, Erdogan and his corrupt, dictatorial regime have resorted to delegitimising all opposition, political and industrial; as terrorism.

We are working with colleagues concerned about human rights such as Amnesty International, but in particular with international colleagues such as the European Trade Union Confederation and International Trade Union Confederation, stressing labour rights abuses in particular, but also the attacks on democracy, freedom of speech, national self-determination. We need to use institutions like the ILO, the UN Human Rights Council, weak as they are, to press for an end to these vicious attacks.

We need to press the British Government over the Theresa May's partnership with President Erdogan in Turkey, work with MPs who share our concerns, for example over the arms sales and keep up the pressure on the Turkish Embassy so that they know we are watching what is going on.

However, the main thing we need to do is make sure that Turkish trade unionists and public service workers know we are on their side.

We must always remember why we are doing this. Partly out of simple solidarity with our sisters and brothers who are in desperate straits. Also, because their struggle is increasingly part of a global struggle against anti-democratic forces, attempting to split working class communities and divide their opponents, spreading fear among those who might oppose them, and allowing exploitation free rein. Let us not forget the links between the Erdogan regime and the Trump regime in the US. Remember who waved Theresa May off on her way to Turkey.

There and here we must unite against oppression. Turkey's struggle is our struggle. "Fear is contagious but so is courage."

We must recognise and support our sisters and brothers' courage within all the above countries, through the work of the Biros' within their relevant branches. After all, unity is strength!

David Hammond  
BIRO  
West Sussex