

## UNISON CONFERENCE BULLETIN 2024

# GET THE TORIES OUT - BUT PREPARE FOR A FIGHTBACK UNDER A STARMER GOVERNMENT

### Unison conference a chance to debate the industrial and political fightback necessary

Two weeks after this conference we will almost certainly be facing a Labour government and Keir Starmer as prime minister. UNISON members will be glad to see the back of the Tories. But many members are also now asking the crucial question 'Will Starmer's Labour make any difference'?

Our public services, and the jobs our members do, have been viciously attacked over the last 14 years of Tory austerity. The NHS has become a brand to be plundered, as it was during the Covid crisis.

Local government is in crisis and chaos. At the start of this year councils were underfunded by nearly £3.5 billion. Many councils face Section 114 notices, where they have to stop making spending decisions, because they can't balance their budgets.

UNISON members will be faced with many battles under a Labour government. The cost-of-living crisis has not gone away. For at least two years, Starmer has sent his representatives to our conferences to let us know that a Labour government will only spend what the Tories are spending, because they are following the rules set by their new backers - Big Business UK - so don't get your hopes up.

Our General Secretary, who backed Starmer to become Labour leader, is now saying "If you don't vote Labour, you're giving a vote to the Tories". But Starmer has backtracked on all of the 2019 manifesto commitments, and already watered down his agreements with the trade union leaders over the New Deal for Working People. His promise of economic growth will disappear in a puff of

*continued inside*

### JOIN OUR FRINGE MEETING!

#### Tories Out! Preparing for a Starmer-led government

Speakers:

**April Ashley,**

UNISON NEC member (pc)

**Hannah Sell,**

Socialist Party general secretary

Wednesday 19 June

5.30pm or end of conference

The Tudor Room, Old Ship Hotel, 32-38 Kings Road (5 mins from conference centre)

#### The Socialist Party says:

- For an inflation-busting pay rise and a campaign for pay restoration
- Stop austerity and privatisation in all services
- Repeal all anti-trade union laws
- Tories out - support candidates that support our policies and members. We need a new workers' party!
- Nationalise rail, mail, energy and utilities under democratic working-class control and management, with compensation only on the basis of proven need
- Take the wealth off the super-rich. For a socialist alternative to capitalism's poverty, inequality, war and climate crisis

Read more, get in touch and join us via  
[www.socialistparty.org.uk](http://www.socialistparty.org.uk)  
or Fb **Socialist Party in Unison**



**TUSC  
AGAINST  
CUTS**  
[tusc.org.uk](http://tusc.org.uk)



NSSN national conference  
Saturday 22 June 11am  
Conway Hall, Red Lion Square,  
London WC1R



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smoke and he will turn to attacking our public services, pay and conditions.

## Organising the fightback

UNISON's cautious approach to defending public services, relying on lobbying parliamentarians, including the Lords, cannot succeed. In local government, a militant approach of setting lawful needs-based budgets, defying spending restrictions, and building mass campaigns including strike action around them, to demand extra money from an incoming Labour government is the only way forward.

The biggest battle that still could unite us all is over pay. During the cost-of-living strikes only small numbers of UNISON members took action - in ambulance branches and selective groups across Scotland and Northern Ireland (where the restrictive Tory strike legislation does not apply). But even this minority forced the Tories to break their pledge to stick with the maximum offered by the Pay Review Bodies.

## Members want a fight

However, in health, this lack of substantial action resulted in an unsatisfactory improved offer being accepted before more members, who voted to strike, could take action.

The elections for the leading committees in Unison have shown members want a more militant strategy. While the general secretary is still from the old right wing, in 2021 members voted for a left-majority NEC. Members will no longer tolerate a leadership that does nothing to organise a mass mobilisation to defend their jobs, pay, terms and conditions. So far, however, many members will not have seen enough difference between the left-leaning NEC of UNISON and the previous right-wing leadership.

The change to strike pay is welcomed, but the numbers taking action still remains small. A major job is necessary to transform the union into a fighting democratic organisation.

We have seen, particularly with younger workers, that health workers will look for all avenues to fight, even if it means looking for another union. The left leadership must develop strategies that members believe are capable of winning for them and not just get bogged down in internal battles with the bureaucracy.

## Political strategy

With the evolution of the Labour Party under Starmer it's clear that democratising the Labour Link is no longer a viable avenue for political change. The trade unions have even less power in Labour than under Blair over policy, and the conference has very little power over policy or direction of the party. UNISON's small voice in the Labour Party rarely represents our members' interests and will

have little or no influence on a Starmer-led government. Because of Starmer's support for big business, his lack of support for the Palestinians facing genocidal attacks in Gaza by the Israeli state, and his ruthless suppression of any vestiges of a left opposition within the Labour Party, hundreds of anti-war, anti-austerity candidates are standing in this general election.

That this is happening now, before the election, gives a glimpse of the pressure that will come from union members for a new party that represents our interests when a Starmer government doesn't deliver and attacks our public services, pay and conditions.

That half a million joined Enough is Enough during last year's strike wave also showed the potential for building a new workers' party, based on the trade unions, which could rapidly become a significant political force in Britain.

Unfortunately, the leaders of the unions, RMT and CWU, who launched Enough is Enough, did nothing to organise that movement into a force that could challenge in elections with a working-class socialist programme.

We need to draw the lessons from that and support the building of a political force that can give a real voice to workers and defend our interests in the way that Labour no longer does.



## Stop the onslaught on Gaza

Over 37,000 have been killed by the Israeli state, nearly half of those reported to be children. A mass global anti-war movement has been built in opposition to this slaughter and in solidarity with the Palestinian workers and poor.

There is massive anger at the role of the Western capitalist governments, particularly the US which bankrolls Netanyahu's murderous regime, and at the Tory government, following in Biden's wake.

But there is also a ferocious reaction to Starmer's tail-ending of the Tories. This is part of Starmer showing the UK capitalist establishment that his New Labour will be a dutiful ally for big business. It shows the vital necessity for the unions to build a political alternative that fights for our policies.

The unions must be at the centre of building mass opposition to the Israeli attack and giving a lead to working-class people to build the protests but also support workers in taking action in industries that directly affect Israel's war efforts. This would put huge pressure on an incoming Starmer government. But not enough has been done by the unions, including the leadership of UNISON.

But the incredible strike wave and the mass movement against the war shows that the working-class has the potential mass power in a united movement of struggle and based on a socialist programme, that can offer a way out of nightmarish capitalism.

- End the onslaught – for the permanent withdrawal of the Israeli military from the occupied territories
- For a mass struggle of the Palestinians, under their own democratic control, to fight for liberation
- For the building of independent workers' parties in Palestine and Israel and links between them
- For an independent, socialist Palestinian state, alongside a socialist Israel, with guaranteed rights for all minorities, as part of the struggle for a socialist Middle East
- No trust in the capitalist politicians, internationally or in Britain. Fight to build a workers' party in Britain that fights for socialism and internationalism



## We can't trust Sunak or Starmer with our NHS - get ready to fight for it!

What should UNISON health members expect from an incoming Labour government? A fight against increased privatisation, a fight to be heard about what is really needed and definitely a fight for a decent pay rise. Staff shortages, unsafe staffing levels – the Tories created them, Labour will continue them. Labour's Wes Streeting talks blithely about “creaking IT systems” and “investment and reform”, but gives no commitment to NHS workers on pay - just a commitment to more privatisation!

Streeting ('The Man Who Can' – but won't) has already showed his opinion of UNISON members by cancelling his booked attendance at Health Conference this year. His claim to become “a shop steward for patients”, whilst ridiculous, is also an insult to us all. We fight for our patients' care every single day. Streeting just needs to listen to health worker trade unions. We will not tolerate Labour's message of increased privatisation and no movement on pay.

### Pay

Like all AfC trade unions, we have suffered year-on-year pay cuts from below-inflation increases. The additional non-consolidated lump sum added to a below-inflation pay rise is now being seen by members for what it was.

NHS pay is now driven so low that the lowest bands are on only one pence per hour higher than minimum wage. Previous below-inflation 'pay rises' included bartering away terms and conditions, like being paid regular enhancements on sickness absence. We must build on the increased turnout in the last pay ballot to ensure that all branches smash the 50% needed to take industrial action - whichever government is elected.

### Workload

Labour's statement to “deliver two million more appointments a year through extra evening and weekend working in the NHS” – what bubble are they living in? A big percentage of UNISON members are already undertaking additional weekend and evening work – just to get their take home pay to a liveable level! UNISON should be taking the lead in raising the necessary demands for a substantial pay rise and particularly for the lowest-paid members. We must demand and fight for an inflation-busting, fully funded pay rise, pay restoration for all, with a minimum of £15 per hour with no strings attached, as the first step. Any negotiations on a shorter working week should be from the starting point of restored pay levels.

### Private profit out of our NHS!

NHS trade unionists see every single day the devastation and chaos the increased use of private companies in our service has created. Privatised blood services, outsourced support services, private companies now sitting on decision-making commissioning groups. None of this leads to an NHS worthy of its workers or the wider working class.

Capitalism is hell-bent on bleeding the NHS dry and Labour has no intention of halting, never mind reversing, that. As grassroot reps in our branches, we must place pressure on the UNISON leadership to fight back with clear demands and red lines. We need a leadership to lead the members into the battle that is necessary to retain jobs, significantly increase pay, reverse privatisation, kick out PFI, and force any incoming government to deliver a fully funded and publically owned NHS.

## Section 114 notices: Put all cuts on hold!

### Demand off Starmer the funding we need for local government jobs and services

Fourteen years after Tory chancellor George Osborne spoke about the “hard road” of austerity leading to a “better future”, council funding has been slashed by around 60% and council services lie in tatters.

In September and November last year, Birmingham and Nottingham City Councils became the seventh and eighth councils in the last six years to issue Section 114 notices. These mean that a council cannot commit to any new spending unless approved by the chief finance officer, and must hold a special meeting within 21 days to decide what to do.

In February 2024, the Local Government Lawyer survey reported that 51% of councils were warning that they were likely to issue a Section 114 notice over the next five years, and 9% within the next financial year. This shows the scale of the problem - illustrated by a trail of destruction of closures of libraries, care homes, children’s centres, swimming pools and countless other council services.

This issue raises stark challenges to an incoming Labour government. Since 2010, Labour councillors across the country have wrongly claimed they are powerless in the face of this onslaught. They have acted as the implementers of devastating cuts with no confidence that they can organise with trade unions and local communities to fight back.

When Section 114 notices are introduced or where government commissioners are sent in, councillors wrongly say there is nothing they can do as decisions are taken out of their hands. What these councils should do is draw up legal no-cuts budgets, using reserves and borrowing powers, and expose the role of the commissioners and the government, as part of a campaign to get local people involved in a fightback to demand that central government fund the services we need.

At a recent Nottingham City Council library closure consultation meeting, to gasps of incredulity, officers informed

us that councillors had received legal advice that they could not attend the consultation during the general election. The local anti-cuts campaign is demanding they therefore immediately pause this library cuts process until after the election. Councils which are making cuts should be putting all cuts on hold, and demanding that an incoming Labour government provides immediate financial support.

### Reinstate ruled-out amendments!

UNISON’s national strategy on fighting council cuts has echoed this weak approach by Labour councils. Motion 25 to UNISON’s national local government conference should be agreed. But three key amendments, by Nottingham City, Hackney, and Surrey branches, outlining strategies to fight, have all been ruled out of order and not even printed, on the advice of the union’s legal officer. Nottingham City’s ruled out amendment says: “Conference believes we need a mass organised campaign of opposition to cuts based on the trade unions and community-based campaigns supported by councillors committed to putting forward lawful ‘no-cuts’ needs based budgets and not voting for cuts. Such a campaign could force this weak and fractious government to back down. It would also be a bold message to an incoming Labour Government to find the funding for Local Government now and not wait for potential future growth.” We are appealing this decision.



### Fringe meeting

organised by Nottingham City, Surrey County, Carmarthenshire County and Southwark branches. Supported by Hounslow, Knowsley, Hackney and Dundee

### Councils in crisis - UNISON members demand a coordinated strategy to fight back

12.30 Monday 17 June  
Old Ship Hotel, 32-38 Kings Road

## Local government pay Demand Starmer improves the offer, and prepare to fight

The Tory local government pay offer is £700 less than last year, whilst council and school workers have seen a 30% cut in wages since 2010!

Socialist Party members argued for a fighting strategy from UNISON leadership on pay this year in response to the pitiful offer of £1,290. This included:

- Moving straight to a disaggregated industrial action ballot
- Target resources to those areas that were able to demonstrate a turnout of more than 40% last year with at least three large employers in each region highlighted
- Consideration of selected action by specific groups of workers

Unfortunately, this view was not shared by the majority of UNISON’s delegates to the NJC committee, and instead we have been asked to consult all local government members throughout June.

This does not mean we cannot organise to win. In 2023, the only large employer with more than 1,500 members to hit the 50% ballot threshold was the Socialist Party-led branch in Knowsley. Lessons can and have already been drawn from their campaign, where they more than doubled their turnout from 2021.

The work must be done now to ensure the highest possible turnout in the consultation process in all branches, forcing the UNISON leadership into action on pay. This involves data-cleansing, meetings with members in person and online, organising new members, activists and contacts, and communication via all platforms.

A return to the strategy outlined above will increase pressure on the likely incoming Starmer government to come back to the negotiating table with an improved offer or be met with an official industrial action ballot in the Autumn.

**SUPPORT motions 40, 38, 33, 30, 34 and 36**