

Minutes of Left Unity Transitional National Council, 8th February 2014

Delegates: Guy H (Dir), Pete G (Hackney), Caroline M (Leicester), Alan T (Southwark), Merry C (Reading), Alison T (Stockport), Bianca T (Dir), Mike S (Nottingham), Steve W (Manchester Central), David S (Lambeth), Liam C (Lambeth) Felicity D (Dir), Laura C (Liverpool), Ed B (Norwich), Terry S (Hackney), Jim H (West London), Susan P (Waltham Forest), Mike B (Leeds), Nick J (Leeds North and East), Sharon M (Birmingham), Toby A (Lewisham), Geoff G (Loughborough), Andrew B (Dir), Kate H (Dir), Doug T (Haringey), Pete M (Rugby), Terry C (Dir), Tom W (Dir), Micheline M (Wandsworth), Anna B (Bristol), Drew M (Cambridge), Salman S (Dir), Chris H (Dir) (Dir =Directly elected members)

Observers: Eve T (West London), GM (Leicester), Steve M (Waltham Forest), Roland R (Waltham Forest), Mark L (Swansea)

Chairs: Pete M (Rugby), Sharon M (Birmingham)

Item 1: Minutes: approved.

Matters arising from the minutes

- a) Steve W – queried work of editorial officer - not had info.
Andrew B - reported that the person responsible has been ill; Tom W standing in.
- b) Micheline M request that we do not use initials on minutes, and avoid acronyms –as this excludes people. Agreed: first name and surname initial to be used.
- c) Item 7 European elections North West Region.
Agreed that members in North West explore a meeting with Peter C. Election policy will be decided at national conference.
- d) Safe spaces – Felicity D requested that the document be sent to branches and discussed as subsequent conference rather than March national conference.

Item 2: Conference Report

Kate H reported as Acting National Secretary on the conference arrangements committee report. Report has been sent to individual members, branches and posted on the website.

Conference location: Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester and is fully accessible.
Conference registration: 10.00, conference proceedings: 11am to 6pm, open to all members, registration on the website.

Election to national council and committees will take place in advance of the conference via online and postal balloting and results will be announced on the day.

Election process: candidates can be nominated by members or branches. Members of committees cannot also be on the national council.

Following discussion, it was agreed that balloting materials should be scrutinised for accessibility including materials for people with visual impairment. It was reported that there were some problems regarding receipt of TNC communications to branches. Kate H affirmed that the TNC agenda had been sent to all branches. Guy H agreed to check the system for glitches.

Regions

It was confirmed that there are 40 seats on the National Council for regional reps. These are elected from the regions by online or postal ballot of all members at the same time as national officers and nationally-elected members. The regions are based upon European election boundaries. Our membership database lists which Left Unity members fall within each region.

There is a separate regional structure of Regional Committees which are elected by the branches – 2 reps per branch. They are elected in branch meetings but all members must be notified. These elections do not have a deadline to comply with.

All voted on and overwhelmingly carried:

1. All members will be informed of their region and of the balloting process for regional reps to National Council.
2. That the deadline for nominations be put back a week to the 27th February.
3. That the deadlines for amendments to resolutions be put back to 5pm on Friday 14th March.
4. A member can stand for more than one post but should not take up more than one place on National Council.
5. Voting-method adopted is the single transferable vote (STV). The conference arrangements committee to decide which method of STV is appropriate.
6. Deadline for registration for conference 22nd March with the possibility of an extension to be agreed to by conference arrangements committee.
7. Membership eligible to vote must be registered by 1st March 2014.
8. Childcare can be paid for at home locality and/or provide a crèche (depends on demand).
9. Travel access fund £1000 maximum.
10. Conference fee £5/£2
11. Observers are welcome subject to availability of space (members have priority)
12. Length of candidate statements for elections to be set a maximum of 350 words.

Conference Agenda

1. Clarified that branches can submit policy resolutions
2. First item will be campaigning resolutions carried over from founding conference unless withdrawn by branches plus new campaigning resolutions from members (with seconders) and branches
3. Second item will be policy commission resolutions and policy resolutions from members and branches (agreed general approach of the Sheffield resolution - a clear focus on core policies (this may include economy, social security, health, housing, education, climate change)).

Item 3: Policy commissions resolution from Pete G

“Proposals Relating to the Left Unity Policy Commissions

1. The Issues

a) A number of the policy commissions originally proposed have either failed to function (Environment and Agriculture and Food) or having produced draft proposals back in September no longer have convenors or anyone willing to respond to the survey sent out before the last TNC (Health and Immigration). The policy commission working party, which functioned well up until the Manchester workshops in September and agreed guidelines for the commissions, has since ceased to operate.

b) Discussion on the forum (where only some commissions reported anyway) have been increasingly dominated by a very small number of people (with six individuals contributing over 50% of postings in the last two months according to a member of the webteam). In the

worst case some of the debates (in the Economics Policy part of the forum) have degenerated into a level of personal abuse which must have alienated newcomers to the forum and has now obliged the convenors to resort to an invitation-only google group to make progress.

c) There has been a lack of transparency about how to access or participate in debate relating to commissions which have not produced any draft proposals either for the forum or elsewhere on the site. The equalities commission which has a broad remit is the most significant example of this. At least one member has complained about the difficulty in obtaining information about this.

d) It remains to be determined which commissions will report in March and which will be left to June, and this decision needs to be taken on February 8. There appears to be an assumption that the Economics commission will be one of those discussed in Manchester but this would prefer to report after the March 1 workshop arranged in order to finalise draft proposals. This would be after the deadline already proposed for circulation to branches.

e) Some commission convenors, notably for Education and Economics, have expressed concerns over the 1500 norm for draft proposals as being too restrictive, given the scope of their remit.

Proposals

1. That the working party on policy commissions be revived with both former active participants (KH, AB, PG, RM) and new volunteers from the TNC to monitor the situation. Its tasks would be to monitor the progress of the commissions and seek new convenors where necessary and would work online

2. That branches be able and encouraged to nominate new participants for any of the commissions, especially those that are reporting in June such as Equalities.

3. That the guidelines be revised to address concerns over the length of draft documents (currently set at 1500 words - suggest a new maximum for Economics and Education in particular, given their broad scope, of 2500 including up to 500 words introduction on the current situation which will need to be amended over time and roughly 2000 words of specific policy proposals.)

4. That the forum is put on ice with a statement to go on the site explaining the reasons for this and how members only can get involved in commissions in future. Given that much of value has already been posted people should still be able to access the forum for a period but no new posts should be possible

5. That a new section of the site be set up where draft proposals can be placed (including the health commission draft already posted on the site back in September) and comments received when commissions are ready to submit.

6. That all motions on policy areas will be taken as amendments to policy commission drafts and composited/organised accordingly by the Standing Orders cttee in liaison with the policy commission convenors. Amendments raising new issues to be taken at the end of each debate”

VOTES TAKEN

1. In favour of Pete G resolution, overwhelming carried, 1 opposed and 5 abstentions
2. Pete Green amendment, overwhelmingly carried, 6 abstentions (the working party decide the core policy discussions depending on work completed).

Item 4: Left Unity Online resolution

(moved by Terry C)

“Following the decision of the meeting of the Transitional National Council on 11 January to postpone discussion and resolution of Left Unity Online's status, we once again put our case for recognition.

We shouldn't have to. At the Left Unity National Co-ordinating Group meeting held on 27 July 2013, item 10 'Founding Members', records that the Group Development Working Group put forward a two-part motion, the second part of which was as follows:

"Motion 2: The Group development working group shall set up a virtual group or groups of Left Unity covering those founding members who do not have a geographical local group they can attend. A virtual group will function through email and whatever other social media to allow all founding members of Left Unity access to its democratic structures.

Founding members can only be a member of one group, virtual or otherwise for the purposes of voting. (Carried, none against, one abs)".

Nothing more happened, which left those members of Left Unity without a branch membership at some disadvantage for the Founding Conference.

We anticipated this democratic deficit would be dealt with following the conference and our existence as an online group was recognised when Left Unity gave us a space on the Discussion Forum.

However, we have been left in limbo, with Guy Harper informing us on 3 December 2013 "Just a disclaimer on the limitations of the virtual group under the constitutional structures for Left Unity: Since the constitutional structures have been set by the founding conference as geographical, the virtual group's operation is limited to discussion and doesn't extend to representation in national structures."

We don't think this is good enough. The Constitution has

"6) BRANCHES

a) Branches bring together members and supporters of Left Unity along area, constituency and ward lines. Decisions to split or merge branches will be made by the groups themselves, subject to approval by the National Council

b) Regional committees or the National Council may create branches according to need or where none exist

c) Individual members will normally be part of the branch based on the geographical area in which they live. In some cases however, an individual member may find it more appropriate to be part of a branch based on where s/he works or studies"

We would point out that 6a) doesn't specify what 'area' means, while b) allows the creation of branches according to need. These can reasonably be interpreted to allow the creation of virtual national or regional branches to bring in members with no local branch until such time as a local branch near their home is formed.

Left Unity is committed to open and democratic procedures. This must extend to all the 1,200 members, not only to those fortunate enough to live in areas with local concentrations of Left Unity members.

Left Unity Online is not seeking to replace or override the local branch structure, simply to give full representation to all. Recognition of Left Unity Online will in fact facilitate the growth of local branches by getting new members currently without a local branch involved and active within the party, instead of putting them off by lack of equal access to the decision-making processes of the party.

We accept that the online branch will not fit within the regional committee structure but as regional representation on National Council will be OMOV, we do not regard this as a critical issue at the present time.

The only alternative would be to recognise Left Unity Online as a caucus, reflecting discrimination on the grounds of geography. This is hardly satisfactory.

Left Unity Online is playing an active and constructive role in the party, with a Discussion Forum, Facebook page with 118 followers and a Twitter presence. We strongly urge the Transitory National Committee, at its meeting on 8 February, to recognise members in geographical isolation as full members of Left Unity and authorize the creation of the virtual branch structure that allows us to play a full part within this party: specifically representation in the Transitional National Council and at the National Conference, once membership of Left Unity reaches 2,000, and inclusion in the circulation of information* that will allow us collectively to act.

*Branches appear to have earlier access to information than members. Thus in a forum posting on the FP Commission "6. According to Kate (as Gen. Sec pro. tem.) our final report will go (1) to all LU branches (2) to the Policy Conference with any comments from branches plus other resolutions."

Proposed: Tim Powell, Left Unity Online

Seconded: Garry Macdonald, Neil Foss, Sam Swash, Left Unity Online"

Vote: 8 in favour; 17 against; abstentions 6

Item 5: Wandsworth resolution on the illegality of destitution

Agreed to submit to national conference.

Item 6: Crouch End resolution on 'Agenda for Hope'

"Left Unity welcomes and supports Owen Jones' recent 'Agenda for Hope' initiative which identifies some of the arenas of struggle necessary to advance the working class movement. Left Unity will seek to contact Owen Jones to advance this Agenda together."

VOTE: amended to include: **"We doubt whether a Labour Government would ever implement this agenda, but Left Unity will implement the nine points in principle and go further."**

(Noted that education was a weak area)

Carried overwhelmingly with 2 against and 2 abstentions

Nominations for LU delegates to the People's Assembly Conference 15th March 2014

Sharon M, Tom W, Felicity D, Micheline M, Steve W

Item 7: Report on Student development

Bianca T spoke at occupations in Birmingham, Sussex etc. Doing a student shout out.

New student email contact address set up students@leftunity.org Student groups now in Birmingham, Exeter, Glasgow, Nottingham and one forming in Cambridge.

Item 8: Report on Trade Union developments

1. Oliver N reported that we need to find a way of linking Left Unity activists in unions together.

2. Website needs an area to share resources and important information about disputes.
3. Approach unions and trades councils - be involved in disputes e.g. Teachers strike 26th March, RMT, Education sector- Unison/UCU/Unite

Item 9: Report on artists and performers

Micheline M reported on her work on the artists and performers' list. Need to use the arts to attract people to Left Unity - music/poetry can be inclusive and involve others.

Item 10: Branch development

New branches formed and increasing participation in branch life.

Item 11: Caucus reports

Terry C noted the absence of a Black members' caucus – a serious issue that needs to be addressed.

LGBTQ: (Terry C) facebook set up, email address, virtual and physical meetings scheduled Sunday 9th February, Monday 10th February (London).

Women: (Susan P) urges women to get involved: luwomenscaucus@lists.riseup.net

Disabled members' caucus: (Merry C) Urged Left Unity members and branches to get involved.

Item 12: Finance report:

Andrew B presented a written statement of accounts to the meeting.

1. Book keeping: Alice K is being employed one day a month as a book keeper for LU. WE have purchased Quick Books pro accounts system as recommended.

2. All groups must set up bank accounts in order to receive 20% of their members' subs as specified in the constitution. So far only 3 local groups have done this.

3. Employment of an admin worker and establishment of premises: 2 days a week at London living wage at 14hours (£8.80 per hour); London ethical property company approached for rent of £700-£900 a month.

4. Membership stands at 1400; 2/3 of members pay waged rate and 1/3 pay concessionary rate.

Next meeting: Agreed to hold another TNC before conference; Kate H tasked to arrange this on a Saturday or a Sunday in the next few weeks.