

AUGUST 2009

UNISON is reason we have Equality Bill says Harman

“UNISON is the reason we have the Equality Bill” – the words of Labour Deputy Leader and Leader of the House of Commons Harriet Harman, speaking at UNISON Labour Link’s recent national political forum held in Manchester. Ms Harman was the key guest speaker at the event attended by over 150 UNISON activists from across Britain, and she was fulsome in her praise for the union’s role in keeping up the pressure for equality.

She contrasted UNISON’s record with that of David Cameron and the Conservatives. Just days before, she told forum, David Cameron had finally apologised for the Conservative Party’s infamous Clause 28 attack on the gay community, some 25 years after the event. But to show had little had really changed, she pointed out that only weeks earlier, Cameron had led his party through the opposition lobby to vote against the current Equality Bill!

Labour’s Deputy Leader had begun by apologising on behalf of MPs for the parliamentary expenses scandal saying that it was a stain hanging over all MPs, regardless of who had offended. She warned that there was a real danger that the media and the right would use it to undermine trust in government and public services in general and that this threatened everyone who believes in and relies on public services.

She also commented on the recent poor election results for Labour and the dismay at the election of BNP representatives to the European Parliament. She promised that Labour would redouble its efforts to direct help to areas where people feel particularly disaffected and where the BNP’s poisonous message has proved effective.

UNISON members used an extensive question and answer session to press Labour’s Deputy Leader on a series of key issues for the union, including the continuing process of privatisation in NHS primary care. She promised to take up the union’s concerns with new health secretary Andy Burnham, a promise reiterated by another government guest later in the Forum, Ed Miliband. A series of questioners pressed her on mandatory pay audits and on the future of public service pensions.



Paul Herrmann

UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis told the Labour Link Forum that they can play a key role in promoting the union’s Million Voices campaign.

UNISON Labour Link uses Forum to press Million Voices campaign

Ministers and delegates went away from UNISON’s National political forum with a clear message that UNISON’s Million Voices campaign will be at the heart of the union’s campaigning work in months ahead. Hundreds of brochures were distributed, with delegates commenting favourably and promising to take the campaign into local Labour parties. National Labour Link Chair Steve Warwick said that it would form the centrepiece of the Labour Link’s work at Labour Party conference in October. For more information go to www.unison.org.uk/million

Around Labour Link

UNISON Labour Link National Political Forum is the key UNISON Labour Link event each year which brings together delegates from across Britain to discuss UNISON's role within the Labour Party. Regions and self-organised groups are entitled to submit motions, and workshop sessions are used to consider the best way for UNISON Labour Link to take forward key decisions made at UNISON's national delegate conference a few weeks earlier. The Forum is highly regarded by senior Labour politicians – recent visitors have included Gordon Brown in 2005 and 2008, Alan Johnson and David Miliband. This year Climate Change Secretary Ed Miliband and Deputy Leader Harriet Harman gave keynote speeches.

MPs reporting back

Four MPs who are also UNISON members were on the platform to answer questions from UNISON delegates. Amber Valley MP Judy Mallaber chaired the session, welcoming fellow co-convenor of the UNISON Group Kelvin Hopkins from Luton North. They were joined by Staffordshire Moorlands MP Charlotte Atkins and Angela Eagle from Wallasey who was recently appointed Pensions Minister.

In her introduction Judy Mallaber outlined some of the issues MPs had been pursuing on UNISON's behalf including local government pensions, two-tier workforce, strengthening the Equality Bill, public procurement, energy tariffs and securing a proper negotiating body for education support staff. The MPs then responded to a series of questions.



Anne McCormack from the North West region drew attention to action being taken in FE colleges and attacked the incompetence of the Learning and Skills Council in bungling the college building improvement programme

Benson Osawe from South Manchester Hospital challenged MPs on privatisation in the health service



nk Forum



Paul Herrmann



Paul Herrmann

Delegates attended workshops chaired by National Committee members to discuss a series of suggestions for improving Labour Link's effectiveness. Following the challenge laid down to Labour Link by Dave Prentis, delegates were asked to consider the best ways for Labour Link to work with local Labour parties to pursue UNISON's objectives. Scotland national committee member Alan Cowan said that the well-attended workshops produced a range of good ideas: "It's clear that delegates were keen to respond positively – they appreciate that it is really important that Labour Link members show the wider union that the link can deliver."

Climate Change Secretary promises radical manifesto

Council leader welcomes delegates to Manchester



Climate Change Secretary Ed Miliband promised the forum that Labour would be developing a radical manifesto to show that the government had the ideas and the energy to tackle the big challenges facing the country. He acknowledged the damage done to politics and to Labour in particular by the expenses crisis. He argued that Labour had a real opportunity to make the case for the power of government to intervene, not just to prevent financial market failure but to tackle climate change. Delegates asked him a series of tough questions particularly on privatisation, in the health service and on the railways.



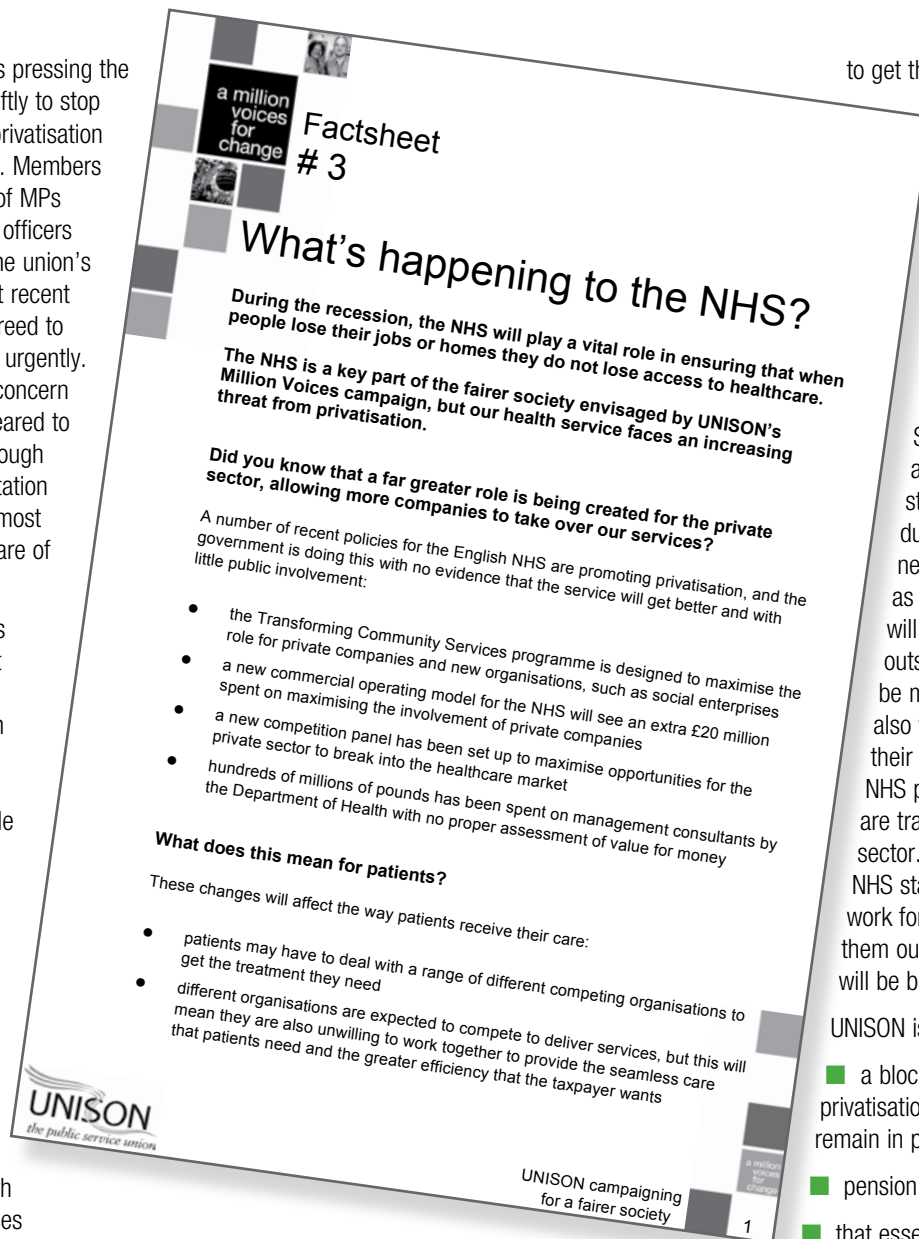
Richard Leese, the Labour leader of Manchester City Council welcomed UNISON delegates to the city, promising them that this was one place where Labour would continue to do well. He attributed this to a good working relationship with unions like UNISON. He explained the ground-breaking Manchester Agreement which was already delivering improvements such as higher pay for some of the council's lower-paid staff.

Labour Link presses Labour on NHS changes

UNISON Labour Link is pressing the government to act swiftly to stop the growing trend to privatisation of the NHS in England. Members of the UNISON group of MPs were briefed by union officers on the changes and the union's concerns at their most recent meeting, and have agreed to lobby health ministers urgently. A number expressed concern that the changes appeared to have been pushed through without proper consultation and they believe that most MPs are largely unaware of what is proposed.

UNISON Labour Link is explaining to MPs that recent government policies for the English NHS are promoting privatisation, with no evidence base and little public involvement:

- the Transforming Community Services programme is designed to maximise the role for private companies and new organisations, such as social enterprises
- a new commercial operating model for the NHS will see an extra £20 million spent on maximising the involvement of private companies
- a new competition panel has been set up to maximise opportunities for the private sector to break into the healthcare market



- hundreds of millions of pounds has been spent on management consultants by the Department of Health with no proper assessment of value for money.

Vice chair of UNISON Labour Link Rachel Voller says that the changes could directly affect the way patients will receive their care: "Patients may well have to deal with a range of different competing organisations

to get the treatment they need.

We are worried that with different organisations competing to deliver services, this will make them reluctant to work together to provide the seamless care that patients need."

She is also concerned about the impact on staff: "We think that during the recession new organisations such as social enterprises will be vulnerable, and outside the NHS staff will be much less secure. They also won't be able to retain their membership of the NHS pension scheme if they are transferred to the private sector. We believe that most NHS staff want to be able to work for the NHS – forcing them out is bad for them and will be bad for patients."

UNISON is demanding:

- a block on any further privatisation – the NHS must remain in public hands
- pension protection for staff
- that essential services, such as hospital cleaning, come back into the NHS.

Rachel Voller is urging UNISON Labour Link delegates to take these issues to Labour Party General Committees to win support from local parties. Members can order leaflets and posters and add their voices to the Million Voices campaign at www.unison.org.uk/million

For more information about the UNISON Labour Link contact

0845 355 0845

Mon - Fri 6am - midnight and Saturday 9am - 4pm **Textphone: 0800 0 967 968**