

# View from the Chair

Barry Russell, Chair of West Midlands Labour Link Committee



**2008 has been an eventful year for Labour Link in the West Midlands. We have worked alongside both the Service Groups and Self Organised Groups on many issues of importance to our members.**

**W**e have also worked with our MPs and MEPs to campaign on issues of raised by our members. Labour Link ensures that MPs are sent regular bulletins on issues and bills that are proposed or about to come before Parliament shortly.

The Labour Party has had a rocky start in 2008. Gordon Brown, first there was calls for his resignation, and then come the financial crises and he has proven his statesmanship, and people are now behind him.

In the West Midlands the Labour Link Committee has been well attended and has been seeking more active members to make the committee more inclusive. The committee welcomes observers who are members of Labour Link; they also contribute to the way Labour Link operates. The Regional Forum was also well attended and was able to hear from one of our MPs, Keith Birch, National Parliamentary Officer to Labour Link

and a representative from West Midlands Regional Labour Party.

Over the last 3 years I have tried to reform the way Labour Link operates within the West Midlands to make it more open to the members. This has resulted in many new members taking an active part in the Labour Link in the West Midlands. Labour link has also worked more

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## View from the Chair

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closely with the rest of the union and we have had more contact with branches than previously. We welcome Branches, Service Groups and Self Organised Groups contacting us on issues that they need our help to raise issues and persuade MPs on current issues and disputes.

In 2008 members represented the West Midlands at National Labour Link Forum, National Labour Party Conference and the West Midlands Labour Party Conference.

Finally a big thank you to the Officers who have backed up the members, Hazel Bird, Charlie Sarell and Tony Rabaiotti. ■



Val Gibson, the new Secretary to West Midlands Labour Link Committee

## Tony Rabaiotti - Secretary to West Midlands Labour Link Committee

**Tony Rabaiotti took over as Secretary to West Midlands Labour Link Committee in 2001. In the subsequent 8 years, the Labour Link Committee was centrally involved in the return of Labour to Government in the 2001, and 2005 General Elections.**

**D**uring the period when Tony was Secretary, Labour Link became a central part of UNISON's arsenal of campaigning on behalf of our members. In particular UNISON's Labour Link played a central role around the campaign to protect the pension rights of Local Government Workers and associated members of the Local Government Pension Scheme. Other areas where Labour Link was used to pursue UNISON agenda, was around the issues of Single Status, but nationally and locally; over proposals to do with School Support Staff, NHS Pensions, reconfigurations of PCTs in Health, and the now dropped proposal to merger the four Police Forces in the West Midlands.

Tony also oversaw the move to get more Branches to look to Labour Link as a way to increase their negotiating leverage, and associated with this was the provision of training for both Regional Staff and Branch Officials.

Tony's period as Secretary, coincided as it did with the

Labour Government, necessarily meant that there was friction between UNISON and Labour in Government. The positives were that influence with Labour could and did result in change in Government actions. The downside was that within UNISON there were occasions when some members felt alienated from the Labour Party. Tony, throughout, sought to demonstrate the importance of the link and how it could best be used to serve UNISON members' interests. Tony's time also coincided with the rise of the BNP as an electoral presence in the West Midlands, and Labour Link worked alongside Searchlight to halt the rise of the fascists, and to reverse their electoral gains.

It is in recognition of his success that UNISON is held in such high esteem by our colleagues in the Regional Labour Party.

Tony hands over as Secretary of the Labour Link Committee to Val Gibson who finds the West Midlands Labour Link Committee in good shape with strong links to the Labour Party both regionally and at a constituency level. ■

# Annual Report from the West Midlands Labour Party Board 2008

UNISON was represented on the West Midlands Regional Labour Party Board by **Pat Hetherton** and **Charlie Sarell** up until the Regional Conference in October and by **Sue Laws** and **Charlie Sarell** after the Conference.

Throughout the year there have been two consistent on-going topics. The first has been the Regional Strategy for the regeneration of the West Midlands, which was driven by Liam Byrne MP and assisted by Seema Malholta, whilst Liam was the Minister for the West Midlands. In the Cabinet reshuffle, this post went to Ian Austin MP, and he is now taking this important project forward, assisted by Lynda Waltho MP as well as Seema Malholta.

The Regional Board has taken a keen interest in this project which is intended to develop sustainable communities across the region, with good transport infrastructures and good links to those institutions of scientific excellence such as Universities and Hospitals.

The other consistent topic of discussion has been the ongoing problem of the British National Party, and its electoral support in parts of the region. However it has been a positive year in many respects as the Board has

seen the BNP losing a number of seats.

The UNISON delegates have continued to raise issues of particular concern to UNISON members over the year. In particular the issues around Agency Workers have been raised. The on-going issue of Equal Pay for work of Equal Value and its implications for funding for Councils and the associated issues of the back-pay for our members, has also been raised, as has the issue about the 2% Public Sector Pay Limit.

There have also been regular reports from Westminster, given either by Jim Cunningham MP, the Chair of the Westminster Group of Labour MPs, or by David Wright MP in his absence. Neena Gill MEP and Michael Cashman MEP have both provided reports back to the Board on the activities of the Socialist Group at the European Parliament.

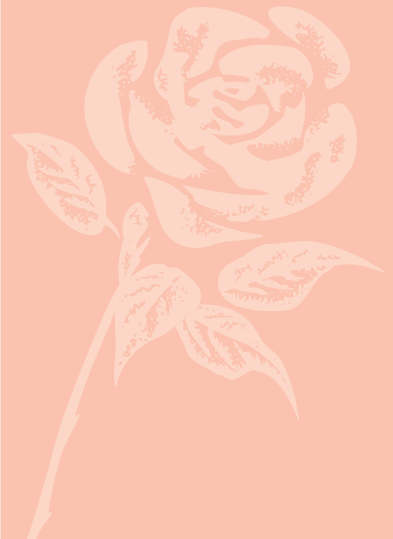
They have also reported back on the activities of the Tory MEP and how

they have voted alongside various neo-fascists and other far right parties in the European Parliament.

The UNISON presence on the Labour Party Board continues to ensure that UNISON's concerns are raised within the Regional Labour Party and the Regions Labour MPs and MEPs. Furthermore that the importance of UNISON members interests, wishes and aspirations are of great importance to the success of Labour in the West Midlands Region. ■

### **Charlie Sarell**

*UNISON delegate to the Regional Labour Party Board.*



# UNISON Parliamentary Rep



by  
Charlotte Atkins,  
MP for  
Staffordshire  
Moorlands

## The Political Climate

The year of 2008 politically has been a real roller coaster from high levels of popularity when Gordon Brown first took over as Prime Minister in late 2007 to the lowest poll ratings of virtually any Prime Minister after the dithering over whether to call a General Election.

In the May 2008 local elections, Labour suffered heavy losses and subsequently lost two parliamentary by-elections in seats that were considered safe for Labour – one to the Tories in Crewe and Nantwich and the other to the Scottish Nationalists in Glasgow East.

But even in May it was not all doom and gloom because successes and gains were achieved in the local elections, for instance, in Slough and Oxford. This was mainly down to the hard work of existing councillors and a real commitment to contacting and listening to the electorate. Both Slough and Oxford Labour members did thousands

of voter identification contacts: This, in addition to the hard work done well before the election, resulted in their hard won gains.

## The Challenge for Labour

But the challenge Labour faces in trying to win a fourth term cannot be underestimated. Remember, in 1997 Labour had never won even two full government terms before. It is very rare for any government to win a 4th term – John Major did it for the Tories against all the odds in 1992. However, with Gordon Brown's sure footed handling of the global economic crisis his popularity has improved substantially while demonstrating the vacuous and brutal approach of the Tories to the down turn – they want to do nothing and allow the recession to run its course with all the adverse implications for job losses, homelessness, and those on low incomes. The recession has exposed the sharp dividing lines between Labour and the Tories.

For instance, by opposing the Government's 2008 Pre-Budget Report and by proposing to restrict the budgets for the Department of Energy and Climate Change and for the Department for Work and Pensions to 1 per cent for 2009/10 the Tories would deny pensioners their extra £60 for winter 2009, stop 32,000 vulnerable households getting the help they need to heat and insulate their homes through the Warm Front Scheme and put further construction jobs at risk. The verdict of the electors of Glenrothes at the by-election in November demonstrated that Labour had begun to win back the support of traditional Labour supporters.

## Important legislation

The year of 2008 saw some momentous legislation going through the Houses of Parliament. First, there was the ground breaking Climate Change Act which in a world first has committed the Government to fixed and binding five year carbon targets with the long

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term goal of reducing emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> by 80 per cent by 2050. The Fertilisation and Embryology Bill caused great controversy with MPs being bombarded with communications from constituents on all sides of the argument. The Bill was hijacked to present the most serious challenge to abortion rights for two decades. But, ultimately, the decision was made on the scientific evidence which demonstrated that the potential viability of the foetus outside the womb had not increased since 1990 when the upper limit for abortions was reduced from 28 to 24 weeks. MPs are free to vote according to their conscience on this issue but interestingly the overwhelming majority of Labour MPs voted to keep the 24 week limit whereas the Conservatives followed their leader and voted for a reduction in the limit.

The Employment Act at last enabled more effective action against employment agencies and, after two private members bills on the

subject, the Government at last bowed to pressure and gave temporary and agency workers the same benefits as full-time employees after they had worked for the company for 12 weeks.

There are more women in Parliament than ever before but the 127 women MPs are still less than one in five of all MPs. Labour has 27 per cent women MPs, the Liberal Democrats just 14 per cent and the Conservatives less than 9 per cent.

It is no coincidence that, since 1997, Labour, the party with the highest number of women MPs 95 out of 127, has also introduced many practical measures to help women and families.

These include the National Minimum Wage which disproportionately benefited women by 80 per cent to 20 per cent men, the doubling of maternity pay, increased maternity leave from 18 to 39 weeks, the right to request flexible working, a massive expansion



in childcare places, extended nurseries and early years provision such as our local Sure Start schemes, Child, Working and Pension Tax Credits to boost the earnings of those on low incomes, particularly women, an overhaul of domestic violence legislation to improve support for women abused at home and the reform of pensions to allow most women to build up a pension in their own right.

But, there is still much more to do – to reduce the gender pay gap and broaden the range of occupations women take up, including more women in business board rooms, to improve pension provision for the many women who do not

qualify for a full pension and to provide more affordable, quality child care for those women who choose to work and have children. ■

**Charlotte Atkins MP**

## Feedback

As always I am keen to receive your feedback by letter, phone or email on:

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## Barry Russell:

West Midlands  
Representative to  
National Labour Link  
Committee

**I was elected to the National Committee in 2008 by the Regional Forum to cover a vacancy arising from Pat Heatherton taking up a full time job. Can I place on record our thanks to Pat for her contribution at national level.**

It has been a very interesting year for me I have come on to the committee just as we entered to a challenging time with the Labour Party. I have been impressed with the level of detail of activities of the national labour link office. Briefings to MPs, MEPs and members of the House of Lords on a regular bases Use of outside company with a good knowledge of lobbying to assist UNISON voice to be heard at all levels of Government, thus ensuring that we can promote our members view and UNISON policies.

The Committee has taken up many issues over the last year including Pay Campaigns, Bills before Parliament like Employment Bill, Energy Bill etc. Labour Link has also been working with General Political Fund to campaign against the BNP. ■

# Farewell from Tony Rabaiotti



Gordon Brown thanking Tony Rabaiotti for his work with Labour Link and TULO. Also in the picture is Charlie Sarell

**This will be my last Report for the Labour Link Annual Review as Val Gibson has now taken over the role. I would like to thank all serving Committee Members and all Labour Link Levy Payers for all their hard work, support and commitment over the past 8 years. I know that Val will benefit from similar support.**

2008 opened with the Single Status dispute in Birmingham. Labour Link worked well with the Birmingham Local Government Branch in fighting the odious proposals of the Tory/Lib Dem ruling group on Birmingham City Council; sadly, these proposals were imposed in the Spring and the matter is now being dealt with legally.

The Local elections in 2008

were disappointing from the Labour Party point of view with most West Midlands Local Authorities seeing either Tory gain or tightening their control. Also the BNP made their presence felt in parts of the Region, although they will be disappointed with their overall result.

We had active participants from the Region at the Labour Party Spring Conference, Labour Party Conference, National Labour Link Forum and the Regional Labour Party Conference.

There has been constructive input from Joan Walley MP, Charlotte Atkins MP, Liam Byrne MP and Neena Gill MEP and I would like to thank them all for their support and dedication.

Finally, working with Labour Link has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience and as we move forward to the European Elections in 2009, I am convinced that the building blocks are in place for success there and in the next General Election. ■

**Tony Rabaiotti**  
*Regional Manager Bargaining  
and Negotiations*

# West Midlands Labour Party Conference 2008



Charlie Sarell and Lynn Horsnett with Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith

The Conference was held in Malvern on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> October 2008. The regional delegates were joined by staff from the region and Valerie Broom Regional Secretary

This event was sponsored this year by T&G Unite.

As part of the conference, policy forums took place on Creating Sustainable Communities, Transport, Revolutionising Skills and Science and Technology.

The individual forums inevitably ran out of time. The issues discussed at these forums were only part reported back to the conference.

The feedback from the forums raised the issues around how, in an ever changing world, we need to adapt to using green technologies, that the culture of lifelong learning needs to be high on the agenda, particularly as future employment will depend on staff having qualifications that/skills to adapt to the ever-changing work place.

The MPs present included Jacqui Smith, Liam Byrne, Ian Austin, Hazel Blears and John Prescott.

A variety of fringe events were held their themes were; Young Labour, Europe, Centro and a Women's event was also held.

Thanks were given to Liam Byrne as the outgoing MP with responsibility for the West Midlands. The conference welcomed Ian Austin and Linda Waltho our new ministerial team. As a parting gift from the region Liam was given items produced from around the region.

The European candidates were also present and answered questions from the floor.

UNISON's Regional Secretary Valerie Broom,

spoke of equality, equal pay and put across the issues that UNISON members have in relation to privatisation and how Public Services will be valuable in providing first class services and of the role that UNISON members in the West Midlands have in the development of these policies.

The final speaker on Saturday was John Prescott, who spoke at length to the delegates about life as an MP. This proved to be highly entertaining.

On Sunday morning, results of who had been elected to the Regional Board were announced. ■

## UNISON Labour Link West Midlands **Further Information**

The current Chair and Vice Chair of Regional Labour Link are:

**Barry Russell** – Chair

**Sue Laws** – Vice Chair

To find out how you can get involved with UNISON  
Labour Link activities, please contact:

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