



International Newsletter

Update on UNISON's international work

February 2015

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UNISON international seminar 2015

The annual seminar is taking place in Sheffield over the weekend 20-22 March. It is a great way to discuss implementing UNISON international policies in your branch or region and to network with other international officers from around the country. This year's seminar will feature sessions on trade agreements, Palestine, Swaziland, Colombia and Qatar. There will also be a session featuring the work of branch activists who have been part of delegations over the past year or so or have been working on international issues.

The Saturday evening 'entertainment' this year gives delegates a choice of watching a film at the hotel or going to cheer on the local ice hockey team, the Sheffield Steelers.

Registration is open to UNISON branch international officers and regional delegates. We are also encouraging young and black members to ask their branch to nominate them.

More about the seminar and how to apply [here](#)

Calendar of international days - branch resource

UNISON has produced a [calendar](#) of internationally recognised days which can be used as a resource for doing international work in branches and regions. Suggested activities include affiliating to one of the solidarity groups UNISON supports, marking International Workers' Memorial Day, linking H&S issues in your branch to international issues, signing online petitions, engaging in campaigns for public services globally.

The calendar is downloadable so can be printed to distribute to members who may be interested in getting involved in UNISON's international work.

UNISON encourages members to register to vote

With the general election less than 100 days away, UNISON is encouraging all members to check that they are registered to vote, and if they're not, to do so immediately. To help, the union has teamed up with the *Daily Mirror* to provide a link to an online registration site – and all you need is your National Insurance number: [Register online](#) or find out more here [Bitetheballot](#)

Amnesty International AGM - concessionary places available

Amnesty International UK's conference and AGM is open to anyone who is a member of the organisation. This year there are a small number of concessionary places available for UNISON activists who are AI members. The AGM and conference will take place at Warwick University 18-19 April. If you would like to be considered for a concessionary place, please email I.Relations@unison.co.uk

Ebola appeal for families of health workers who have died

The Ebola virus continues to claim the lives of people in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Hundreds of those who have died are health workers and support staff who are desperately trying to combat the epidemic.

Public Services International (PSI), of which Dave Prentis is president, has set up an emergency appeal, [PSI Aid Fund](#), for the health workers and their families who have no access to social protection. Please ask your branch or region to consider making a donation.

European Commission creates system to allow companies to bypass courts

TTIP, a trade agreement like no other, takes another turn for the worse as the European Commission agrees a system that will allow multinational companies to bypass national courts and laws.

In an article for Left Foot Forward, Nick Crook, head of international relations at UNISON, argues that the investor-state dispute mechanism (ISDS) will effectively bypass democratic institutions and allow disgruntled companies to sue governments who inhibit their profit motive by bringing privatised public services back into public ownership.

The Commission and the UK government have recently sought to reassure a growing sceptic public that TTIP does not pose a threat to the NHS and other public services but as the agreement is being negotiated in secret UNISON is not convinced by the arguments and wants the NHS and other vital public services excluded from any agreement.

Read the article in full [here](#)

UNISON supporting workers in Nicaragua

A delegation from West Midlands region and the George Eliot NHS Trust will be visiting Nicaragua for meetings with the health union FETSALUD this February. The main purpose of the visit will be to sign a twinning agreement between George Eliot Hospital and the Nilda Patricia Hospital in Ciudad-Sandino, Managua. The aim of the agreement is to promote co-operation and understanding of partnership working and will provide an opportunity for a mutual exchange of advice and expertise in order to better overcome the challenges faced by both partners.

The programme will include visits to maternity centres, women's hospitals, children's hospitals and rural and urban health centres. Although Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere after Haiti, Nicaraguans enjoy free health care and have benefitted from the advances made in the fields of health and education in the country since the return to power of the Sandinista government in 2007. Maternal mortality and malnutrition rates have been reduced by up to 50% and the delegation will be able to witness the emphasis which is placed on health education and preventive medicine.

A return visit to the UK from FETSALUD is planned for April this year. They will visit the region and attend Health Conference as guests of the union. UNISON West Midlands, working with the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign Action Group, is currently managing a one-year project with FETSALUD financed by UNISON's International Development Fund.

Bangladesh workers still fighting for compensation. Sign the petition!

Images of the collapse of Rana Plaza still continue to shock the world nearly two years after the incident. Over 1,200 workers, mostly women, lost their lives when the factory where they were producing garments for some of the biggest clothes companies in the world, including high street brands, collapsed crushing them to death.

The UN set up a system of compensation for the victims and their families but some of the biggest names are still dragging their heels and refusing to pay into the fund. Benetton is one of them. It has donated to a charity but the victims want justice through proper compensation and not charity. Avaaz, the online campaigning group, has set up an [e-action](#) calling on Benetton to pay up. Almost 1m people have so far signed. Please add your name to the [petition](#), share it, and encourage colleagues and friends to sign it.

UNISON supporting workers in Bangladesh

UNISON has funded a one-year project with Labour Behind the Label, a British NGO working to improve conditions for workers in the global garment industry. The project has now been running for six months to support two garment workers' federations in Bangladesh to build their capacity and to get involved in the safety Accord that was set up in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster. The Accord is in place to ensure that factories are regularly inspected and that workers' reps are part of the process identifying risks and hazards in the workplace. Labour Behind the Label, as a member of the working group, provides policy support to the Accord steering committee. It is also involved in seeking compensation for the victims of Rana Plaza and their families. To date all companies associated with Rana Plaza have contributed to the fund but Benetton continues to refuse to. A major online [campaign](#) has been set up to shame Benetton to contribute to the fund which is still short of £5m to adequately compensate the victims.

One of the successes of the project has been the opening of an office by the federation BRGWF in Gazipur where many of the factories are located. The office now welcomes regular visitors from the nearby factories as the federation is not allowed speak to workers at the factories, and some of the factory owners have been using spies to find out which workers are speaking to the federation. The office allows workers the opportunity to speak to someone in confidence without fear of reprisal. The office will need ongoing financial support in the future to help it to pay its rent, and UNISON has said it will consider this. UNISON has agreed to publicise the funding appeal to branches and regions.

Last of the Miami Five released by US

Amid euphoric scenes in Havana, the last remaining members of the Miami 5 were released by the US government in December. All five had been convicted by a US court of conducting terrorist activities. The activities were in fact the five infiltrating far-right Cuban exile groups in the US who had been plotting to carry out terrorist acts in Cuba. When they made their findings known to the US authorities, they were charged rather than the intelligence they provided being acted upon.

As part of increased diplomacy between the US and Cuba, the remaining three were released late last year. They are now back in Cuba with their families and friends, and received a rapturous welcome on their return which was [televised](#) and watched by millions.

Cuba Solidarity Campaign is now calling for the blockade to be lifted, and is continuing its campaign to have the visa refusal of René González overturned so that he can visit the UK. The case is being heard by the Court of Appeal, and urgently needs financial support. You can find out more about this and donate towards the legal costs of the appeal [here](#).

Banana workers in Costa Rica organise

UNISON East Midlands region has teamed up with Banana Link UK, to support a UNISON International Development Fund project in Costa Rica.

The project will support the organising work of SITRAP agricultural union in tropical fruit plantations that supply pineapples and bananas to UK supermarkets.

The UK is a huge importer of pineapples and bananas from Costa Rica but the human cost of cheap fruit is at the expense of the workers employed on the plantations. Banana Link estimates that there are 70,000 people employed in the tropical fruit sector: up to 70% of whom are migrant workers from Nicaragua. 'Workers often fail to earn enough money to cover their basic household costs and do not have their most basic labour rights respected' said Jacqui Mackay who is the national coordinator at Banana Link.

The project will run for one year, and will give UNISON East Midlands an opportunity 'to build international solidarity with another union working to oppose the casualisation of the workforce and race to the bottom in terms and conditions' which public sector workers in the UK are facing also.

Banana Link is open to affiliations – details [here](#)

Tamil Solidarity

By Isai Priya, Tamil Solidarity

The [Tamil Solidarity campaign](#) was set up in 2009, when more than 100,000 Tamils marched in London in opposition to the massacre of tens of thousands of Tamils taking place in Sri Lanka at the time. More than 140,000 Tamils were killed by the Sri Lankan armed forces in the last phase of the war alone.

Since Tamil Solidarity was set up, we have built close links with the trade union movement. The national affiliation of UNISON significantly boosted the campaign and has had a significant impact in the community, while also raising the profile of the union. In order to further strengthen these ties we have launched a 'Join a Union' initiative as one of our campaigns. There are more than 300,000 Tamils living in the UK, many of them working in the public sector, while many others – especially young people – find themselves in low-paid work in retail and other parts of the private sector. We aim to help unionise them to secure their rights in the workplace.

As a grassroots campaign, we rely on the donations of members and supporters, and on affiliations. Why not invite someone from Tamil Solidarity to speak at your meetings to find out more about this campaign – and how we can take the 'Join a Union' initiative further in your local area. Please also consider affiliating your branch to Tamil Solidarity to help our important work.

Upcoming events

Friday-Sunday, 20-22 March 2015, Sheffield

UNISON [international seminar](#) weekend

Saturday-Sunday, 18-19 April 2015, Warwick

[Amnesty International](#) UK AGM and conference

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