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International Newsletter

Update on UNISON's international work

February 2016

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International committee priorities for 2016

The NEC International Committee agreed its work programme for 2016 at its meeting in January. The Committee has prioritised work on Palestine, Colombia, Trade and Qatar for this year and will also undertake work on public services in the global south and ethical procurement in global supply chains.

- **Palestine**

The continuing denial of Palestinian rights continues to be a major priority for UNISON. The illegal occupation affects millions of Palestinians and undermines the prospects for peace in the Middle East. Israel has rapidly escalated its settlement building programme and increased restrictions on Palestinians in the occupied territories. Governments, including the UK, are responding to the growing movement for Palestinian rights with new regulations, which threaten to restrict campaigning on Palestine.

This year UNISON will continue to campaign against the illegal occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the blockade of Gaza; including building on our work to encourage

companies to end their involvement with the occupation. This April members of the NEC international committee and representatives of regions will visit Palestine to build links with trade unions and organisations that support workers rights. We will work with the Palestine Solidarity Campaign to build the trade union network and oppose new laws which seek to silence opposition to the illegal occupation.

We have recently approved three new projects in Palestine, supported by the UNISON International Development Fund. All three will make a significant difference to the lives of people living under the occupation. We are supporting the work of the Workers Advice Centre in East Jerusalem to improve the socio-economic situation of Palestinian women; working with Kav LaOved to support agricultural workers on settlement farms in the Jordan Valley, infamous for their appalling pay and conditions for Palestinian workers, and we plan to assist the establishment of the Knowledge and Socialist Thought Institute in Ramallah, providing training to potential trade union leaders.

○ **Colombia**

A UNISON delegation made up of NEC and regional representatives and organised with Justice for Colombia, went to Colombia at the end of 2015. The delegation heard first hand from trade unions, human rights defenders and community groups about both their hopes and the their fears for the peace negotiations. It is likely that the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas will sign a peace agreement in the first half of 2016. However, that will only be the beginning of a process that must deliver not just peace but also lasting social and economic justice for the people of Colombia. Attacks on trade unionists and human rights defenders continue and the Colombian legal system has failed to prosecute their attackers.

The delegation came back determined to strengthen UNISON's support for Justice for Colombia and our solidarity projects with the Colombian trade union movement through the UNISON International Development Fund. A report and film about the delegation are being produced and will be made available for use in branches. All regions and branches should affiliate to Justice for Colombia and more information about how to do this can be found on the [JfC website](#).

○ **Trade**

Three free trade agreements currently being negotiated by the European Union potentially threaten public services by forcing through market liberalisation and could drive down trade union and employment rights by failing to enforce compliance with ILO core conventions. UNISON has produced [several briefings](#) for members about these agreements known as TTIP, CETA and TiSA

Whilst TTIP has received a lot of attention and media coverage, the EU agreement with Canada known as CETA is more advanced and it is likely that the formal ratification of the agreement by the European Parliament and the UK parliament will start in the second half of 2016. When we have a timetable for ratification UNISON will be working with European and Canadian sister unions to campaign against CETA and will be encouraging members to lobby their MPs and MEPs.

○ **Qatar**

The number of deaths on construction sites in Qatar is rising, and most of the 2m migrant workers continue to have their fundamental rights violated. Because of the interest generated by Qatar hosting the 2022 World Cup, UNISON will increase its involvement in campaigns designed to end the Kafala system of sponsorship in the Emirate. This includes the TUC's [Playfair Qatar](#) and campaigns around other major sporting events which are set to benefit from the major infrastructure building programmes being undertaken. UNISON will also work to highlight the abuses of workers in other sectors, including education and public services.

We will be encouraging UNISON activists to get involved in the issue. This includes taking action outside football grounds; engaging colleagues, friends and family in the campaign; working with other branch officers on proposed actions; working with NGOs and other unions in the workplace, and updating branch members on developments regarding the exploitation of migrant workers in Qatar.

Through the UNISON International Development Fund, UNISON will seek to support organisations in sending countries who are working with would-be migrants to ensure they are fully informed of their rights and the challenges they face working in the Gulf States.

○ **Public services in the global south**

For many years the UK government and international finance institutions have actively promoted privatisation as a way to reduce poverty in low income countries, generally with disastrous results. Traditionally they have focused on infrastructure, but increasingly the UK government have pursued corporate opportunities in health and education.

Far from reducing poverty, this approach to development undermines public services, increases inequality and is detrimental to the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Whilst the government's promotion of low fee schools, run by multinational companies, has come under scrutiny, more needs to be done to expose the damaging impact of healthcare privatisation.

This year UNISON will launch a new campaign to challenge the UK government's aggressive promotion of private and part private healthcare provision in low income countries, particularly Public Private Partnerships. We will build on our work with Public Services International and health unions in Ebola affected countries in West Africa, to promote the value of decent public health services.

○ **Ethical procurement in global supply chains**

The collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 was a turning point for workers in Bangladesh as it helped focus world attention on abuses in supply chains for goods made for global clothing brands. The fight for decent work, including a living wage, and the right to organise, underpin workers' campaigns across South East Asia, including the Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar/Burma.

The NEC international committee is developing a strategy to encourage branches to negotiate with their employers to ensure that goods purchased (work wear, shoes, garments, hospital linen, etc) or provided for sale through vending machines or canteens are ethically sourced so that there is no exploitation in the supply chain.

As part of the strategy to draw attention to the exploitation of workers in the supply chain, we will campaign for the Modern Slavery Act to be enforced and any loopholes closed. We will support campaigns and projects, such as the ones in Bangladesh and Cambodia which are funded by the UIDF; we will sponsor a speaking tour by a campaigning worker from SE Asia; and we will campaign for the ILO Forced Labour Protocol to be widely ratified.

International seminar 2016

The annual international seminar is taking place in Sheffield over the weekend Friday 4 March – Sunday 6 March 2016.

The seminar 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 supply chain exploitation, Colombia, public services in the global south and Palestine. A training session focusing on the role of the branch international relations officer is also planned. The exact programme of activities is subject to change.

We will also be holding a film screening in the hotel as the Saturday evening entertainment for the seminar.

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 can be found [here](#).

Human Rights Day – the route of shame

On 10 December, UNISON took to the streets of London, visiting the embassies of some of the countries with appalling records on workers' and human rights. Using the slogan 'Workers' Rights are Human Rights', Liz Snape, assistant general secretary of UNISON and president of the TUC, was joined on the 'route of shame' by Amnesty International and the TUC, to hand in letters of protest to the representatives of Swaziland, South Korea, Bahrain, Qatar, Colombia and Turkey.

Earlier on in the day, Nick Crook, head of international relations at UNISON, spoke to [Radio Labour](#) about why UNISON was using Human Rights Day to focus on countries whose treatment of workers and their unions amounted to human rights' violations.

During the day, only the offices of Swaziland and Colombia allowed the small delegation to hand in the letter in person. The representatives of Turkey refused to let the delegation in and security staff at the Embassy of Qatar created a mini-incident by calling the police – six of whom turned up in four vehicles, before quickly realising that the embassy had overreacted.

Responses to the letters (one of which had to be posted later) were received from Bahrain, Qatar and Colombia. UNISON was disappointed that the responses refuted our assertion that human rights' violations were taking place, and that unions were being targeted for special attention not only by the authorities but by paramilitaries and others. The union will follow up on each response received as it is important that countries are continually reminded of their human rights' obligations, and are held to account for any violations that occur.

Solidarity with unions in Turkey

In recent months life for trade unionists in Turkey has got significantly harder. Since the ruling People's Democratic Party (HDP) lost their majority in June 2015, the media, trade unions and civil society have complained of a crack down and increasing violations of fundamental freedoms and rights by the state.

When violence flared up between the government and the Kurdish political party the PKK trade unions DISK and KESK organised a rally for peace on 10 October 2015. The rally was attacked by terrorists, over 100 were killed and many more were injured. Many hoped in vain that the snap elections in November would mark an end to the violence. Sadly in the South East of the country things have got worse.

In December DISK member Ramazan Uysal was shot whilst working on water valves for the Cizre Municipality. More recently, in January Mehmet Kaplan, a sanitation worker, also for the Cizre Municipality, was shot dead in front of his home. In recent days three members of DISK were arrested and detained for carrying out trade union activities.

UNISON has regularly raised concerns about the denial of workers' and human rights with the Turkish government, including on human rights day in December. Earlier this month general secretary Dave Prentis wrote to Turkey's President Erdogan, and Turkey's ambassador in London, calling for a full, impartial investigation into the killings, and for the release of the arrested trade unionists. You can read his letter [here](#).

Focus on Southern Africa

In each newsletter we focus on a solidarity organisation UNISON affiliates to nationally and we encourage branches to affiliate too.

Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA) is the successor organisation to the Anti Apartheid Movement; it campaigns for justice, rights and development in solidarity with the people of Southern Africa. ACTSA works closely with trade unions and social movements across Southern Africa, supporting their demands on issues such as democracy and rights for Zimbabwe and Swaziland, women's rights and justice for South African gold miners with silicosis.

You can find out more about ACTSA on [their website](#).

More information about affiliating your branch to ACTSA can be found [here](#).

Nicaragua Solidarity appeal

Dear Colleagues,

In recent years the West Midlands region has (with the support of NSC) been building links with Nicaragua and particularly with FETSALUD (The Nicaraguan health workers' union).

This began with a visit by two young Nicaraguan trade unionists. The interest their visit raised, particularly with health branches, led to us inviting over a leading activist from FETSALUD (the Nicaraguan health union). This in turn inspired one of our health branches

(George Eliot Hospital) to seek a formal twinning arrangement with a hospital in Nicaragua, leading to our region sending a delegation to Nicaragua.

One of our main aims in building links was to identify in what ways we could offer practical international solidarity. Discussions identified 2 issues:

- FETSALUD has a predominantly young and female activist layer. Their problem is the education and development of those activists.
- Since the return to power of the Sandinista government Nicaraguans enjoy free health care and have benefitted from advances in healthcare and education. However, Nicaragua remains the second poorest country in the western hemisphere, after Haiti, and this impacts on the level of resources available.

Through the UIDF (UNISON International development fund) a successful education programme took place in 2014/2015 to train some of these activists and it is hoped that this initial success will be built on. As regards health resources it was suggested by FETSALUD that we could help by collecting medical supplies and equipment which could be sent to Nicaragua. Hence this appeal letter!

We are writing to all health branches asking you to approach your employer to identify whether there are medical supplies or equipment they do not need or are surplus which they could let us have. Our region in partnership with NSCAG has agreed to arrange the shipment of these to Nicaragua. We would appreciate (as will the Nicaraguan people) your support in this appeal

If you can help in any way please contact me

Dave Auger
Regional International Officer
UNISON West Midlands
daveauger61@hotmail.com

Calendar of international days – a branch resource

The 2016 UNISON calendar of international days is now available to download.

This calendar of globally-recognised international days and key days for UNISON has been designed to be used as a resource when planning work in your branch. It gives some suggested activities and provides web links to organisations working on particular issues. UNISON is affiliated to some of the organisations and encourages regions and branches to affiliate also.

The PDF version of the calendar can be downloaded [here](#).

Dates for your diary

¡VIVA NICARAGUA – Celebrating young volunteers in Nicaragua!

Thursday 11 February, The Calthorpe Arms, 252 Gray's Inn Road, London – [event webpage](#)

International seminar

Friday 4 March – Sunday 6 March, Sheffield – [International seminar 2016](#)

International Women's Day

Tuesday 8 March – internationalwomensday.com

Playfair Qatar action at football grounds – ask your supporters' club to get involved

Saturday 12 and Sunday 13 March – playfairqatar.org.uk

Amnesty International UK national conference and annual general meeting 2016

Saturday 9 April and Sunday 10 April, Nottingham – Amnesty International UK website

Rana Plaza disaster anniversary

Sunday 24 April – Labour Behind the Label website

International Workers' Memorial Day

Thursday 28 April – [International Workers' Memorial Day \(TUC page\)](http://International Workers' Memorial Day (TUC page))

UNISON, 130 Euston Road, London, NW1 2AY, United Kingdom
Tel: 0800 0 857 857. Web: www.unison.org.uk

This newsletter was produced by UNISON international unit. Any comments, please email:
I.Relations@unison.co.uk

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