

This isn't how I imagined my first conference as general secretary –
I'm sure it's not what any of us expected.
But I'm still incredibly proud to be here,
speaking to you as UNISON's general secretary –
the first woman general secretary in the history of our union.

I want to thank everyone who took part in the general secretary election –
everyone who campaigned, and everyone who voted for all the candidates.

And, of course, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor Dave Prentis –
our general secretary for 20 years.

Under Dave's leadership we became the biggest union in the country.
And his championing of equalities and self-organisation
put both at the heart of everything we do.

I'm incredibly conscious that I'm following in the footsteps of three distinguished
leaders – Alan Jinkinson, Rodney Bickerstaffe and Dave Prentis –
and I look forward to building on the legacy of their achievements.

It's been two years since our last conference – and so much has happened since then.
We've had Brexit. We've seen the Tories win a massive majority at Westminster.
And, of course, our lives have been turned upside-down by the pandemic.

It's been a huge challenge for all parts of our union.
And I want to thank our amazing presidential team –
Josie Bird, Sian Stockham and James Anthony –
for their hard work through this difficult time.

As you know, presidents are usually in post for a year.

As well as being the senior lay leader,
they have an important ceremonial and representative role too.
They usually go round the regions,
opening new buildings, giving out awards,
sometimes even travelling abroad to visit a union in another country.
But it's been very different for Josie, Sian and James.

They've been in post for two years now –
and most of their time has been spent online – in meetings
dealing with the incredibly serious issues that affect our members and staff.

And worse still,
now that our conference is online,
those of you who appreciate Josie's sartorial elegance –
especially her vertigo-inducing shoes –
will no doubt be disappointed that you can't see her collection –
but I can assure you they're still fabulous.

But seriously, I'm so grateful to them for their hard work and commitment.
It can't have been easy.

Sian, our senior Vice President, still working two jobs as a care worker and active in her
branch.

James, a senior nurse working throughout the pandemic, on top of his role in the union.
And Josie – active in her branch and region, home-schooling her young children while
being on call night and day, seven days a week, ready to deal with whatever issues
come up, and still fulfilling her role as the most senior lay leader in our union.

I hope you will join me in thanking them all.

I'm incredibly proud of the work our union has done since the first lockdown –

going into emergency action mode – responding to everything thrown at us – and so much more.

I want to thank our entire NEC for the time they have put into online meetings – ensuring our union was still working for members.

And our service group and regional convenor teams for all they did to put the focus on supporting branches and members and getting advice and support out.

And of course, our staff in every part of the union who overnight turned their jobs round to focus entirely on what was needed during the pandemic.

I've done many meetings, and been on hundreds of calls over the past year – I've met activists who are not only dealing with the pandemic in their personal lives and at work, but also supporting other activists and members through what's probably one of the worst times in their life.

And I've also heard uplifting stories –

- Groups of stewards volunteering to be vaccinators.
- Branches staying in touch with vulnerable people in the community –
- delivering food parcels,
- collecting medicines,
- making sure children doing schoolwork at home have access to IT equipment,
- organising food – and even sleeping arrangements – for members working shifts in busy hospitals and care services,
- and of course, supporting members and their families with help for funeral costs when the worst happens.

We've all been affected by this terrible virus.

Far too many of us have lost friends, colleagues, and family members.

Covid has shone a spotlight on inequality at home, and around the world.

It's highlighted the racism and discrimination we see all around us.

The World Bank described the pandemic as:

“a heat seeking missile speeding towards the most vulnerable in society.”

We've seen its disproportionate impact on black people,

- women,
- disabled people
- and those on low incomes.

This isn't a coincidence, or bad luck, and it certainly isn't down to life choices.

It's because they're more likely to be in jobs that can't be done from home –

- cleaners and catering staff,
- bus and delivery drivers,
- care and health workers,
- the workers who empty our bins –
- and those who bury our dead.

These are just a few of the many people who still had to go to work,

however bad things got –

and for most low paid workers that meant using public transport –

it meant getting up close and personal with other people –

often with people who either can't self-isolate or don't understand self-isolation.

And for too many, their precarious employment status meant it was difficult to make a fuss about PPE or health and safety issues.

Our members have kept the country going during this pandemic.

Whether it's those who went to work to keep the rest of us safe and well –

- police support staff and our school staff members,
- or those who made sure we still had water and energy –
- and those who kept places like the Mersey tunnel and the Thames barrier working.

That's what UNISON members do.

They don't make a fuss – they just get on and do their jobs.

For those working at home it has also been challenging.

- Adapting to working online,
- home educating,
- still caring for others,
- that brings its own pressures.

Time and again, our members and other essential workers –
were needlessly exposed to danger –

because they weren't given the protective equipment they so desperately needed.

Remember the early months of the pandemic? Matt Hancock might have forgotten but we haven't!

- Workers wearing PPE made out of bin bags,
- And facemasks made from old bits of clothing.
- Care workers given disposable facemasks and told to make them last a week.

That was the reality back then.

We must do everything in our power to make sure this never happens again!

Because we know there will be future crises –
climate change, another virus.

And it's absolutely imperative we learn the lessons from this crisis
so that we're much better prepared for the next one.

You might have enjoyed the spectacle – pardon the pun –

Of Dominic Cummings dishing the dirt on his old boss a few weeks ago.

But whether you believe him or not,

it's a fact that the UK has one of the worst death rates in the world from this virus.

Why?

- Because we weren't prepared.

And why weren't we prepared?

- Because of 10 years of austerity from Westminster.
- 10 years of underinvestment in our public services,
- 10 years of cuts.

So yes, we're leading the call for an urgent public inquiry.

I want us to learn the lessons –

but I also want to make sure those people who used the pandemic to
make themselves rich are held to account.

Cronies of government ministers,

family members – and even ministers themselves –

involved in shady deals where companies sprang up literally overnight –

claiming to be able to get PPE deals that never materialised –

or were so shoddy they couldn't be used.

And even when services and equipment were provided,
the profits made were eye-watering.

I heard a Tory MP describe this as a good thing –
it was, he said, the “private sector stepping up to the plate” in a time of crisis.

How much better if the private sector had offered free services and expertise –
or even provided goods at cost price during such an emergency.

What they did was profiteering, plain and simple.

Do you know what the definition of profiteering is?

I looked it up.

It's *“the act or activity of making an unreasonable profit on the sale of essential goods especially during times of emergency...”*

And profiteering is still illegal in this country – so yes, I want an inquiry –
and I want those people held to account.

When the pandemic was raging

and it was obvious black people were being hit hardest –

Where was the advice and guidance from public health bodies?

Where was the action from enforcement bodies across the UK?

It was unions like ours that demanded action and raised the issue with employers
across the country.

Why were some black men four times more likely to get covid?

Why did care workers die at twice the rate of people from similar backgrounds?

We need answers to these questions.

Because if we don't learn from these mistakes,

we will inevitably end up repeating them with similar dire consequences.

So, what has the virus taught us?

It's shown us who we really depend on when the chips are down.

And it wasn't the hedge fund managers and management consultants –

It was our public services – stretched almost to breaking point –

that got us through this pandemic.

And when I say 'our public services', I'm talking about the courageous, hard-working people who work in them.

Despite years of cuts and government mismanagement,
our NHS didn't collapse under the enormous pressure it faced.

Local government continued to hold communities together.

And we know that strong public services depend on people being paid –
and treated – fairly.

Pay is pivotal –

and we need to build up our members' confidence and expectations.

It's critical we get a 'yes' vote in the current ballots we're holding in higher education
across the UK –

and in local government in Scotland.

And we can win.

Look at the great success we had in Northern Ireland.

Members took strike action and got a better pay deal.

I had the huge privilege of being there at midnight, outside a hospital,
as the first strikers walked out at the start of the dispute.

And in Scotland, by threatening action, with members' support,

they forced the government and employers to negotiate with them.

Action that resulted in health members accepting a 4% pay rise –
with more for the lowest paid.

Successes like these don't happen by magic.

They depend on the hard work and organisation of branches, lay leaders and staff.

Even before the dust settles on this pandemic, people are ready for change.

This is our generation's 1945 moment.

Out of the ravages of World War II came welfare reforms and the NHS.

Our country is now at a similar turning point – we have a choice.

It's time to be bold – and rise to the challenge again.

Governments in Scotland and Wales have rejected Westminster's pay freeze.

Instead they're committed to working with unions on improving pay and conditions,
and delivering a decent care system –

and I know UNISON in Scotland and Wales will be holding their governments to these
commitments.

In our English regions we're working with some of the elected mayors to push through
policies that will protect services and jobs.

At Westminster, we have the Tories and their levelling-up agenda.

I'm not quite sure what it means – and I'm not holding my breath –
but I am trying to be less cynical.

So, yes, we'll look at what this means –

I'll even go further – we'll offer to be part of the moves to level up society –

That's quite an offer, I think, from the biggest union in the country.

And here's our proposals:

- An employment bill that would put an end to zero hours contracts –
- and fire and rehire practices
- A real Living Wage – as an absolute minimum.
- An end to the pay freeze.
- A commitment to rebuild our local government services.
- And a meaningful reform of social care that puts the sector in the engine room of the recovery.

Conference,

I want our union to continue to grow.

Because as we get bigger,
we become even stronger.

I want to give a voice to all our members –
and that means listening to them.

Whether you're a care worker in a small care home,
or you work in an energy company call centre,
as a nurse in a big hospital,
or as a teaching assistant in a school –
all of you will have a chance to be heard and take part in the union.

I'm looking at member engagement and what this actually means in practice.

I want to know why so few people, especially women, take part in our elections –
and I want to do something about it.

I want to make sure proportionality and fair representation are a reality in every part
of our union.

And to do all this, our branches, regions and devolved countries have to be well-
resourced.

I've pledged to work with regional leaders and branches to deliver this –

to widen decision-making in the union,
to make sure resources are in the right place at the right time.

Recruiting and organising are the lifeblood of our union –

We need an organising and recruitment strategy that's focussed and has measurable outcomes.

One that also makes full use of digital technology.

And I've made commitments to a new UNISON college.

We already have a great learning culture in UNISON –

our union learning reps are inspiring –

and I want to build on that.

A full review of what we do is already underway.

Over the past year, we recruited and trained over 1,000 new Health & Safety reps, which shows we can move quickly when we need to.

I want a UNISON college that has a clear offer for activists and members.

Because I know how life-changing that can be.

I was at a regional meeting in Northern Region a few weeks ago when a steward got an award.

He told us how, three years ago,

he'd been having trouble at work and the union helped him.

And this started him on the road to being an activist.

He spoke about the support and training he'd been given –

and how he went from being bullied – and feeling overlooked – to now

being a branch secretary who is taken seriously by his employers and negotiates in meetings with the chief executive.

It was an emotional and inspiring story – and many of us on the call were moved to tears.

At the first branch AGM I went to after I was elected, - it was Lothian Health Branch - a young steward asked me a question.

If I had to give someone like him one piece of advice, what would it be?

I'd only just become general secretary and, if I'm honest, his question stopped me in my tracks.

So, I thought about it - and said -

"Think back to why you first became an activist.

Maybe it was something you saw in the workplace?

Something bad happening to someone else?

And you thought - this is wrong, this shouldn't be happening.

And you decided - I'm going to do something about this.

It's that sense of injustice

Whatever it was, however big, however small,

it was something that offended your sense of fairness and common decency.

Your sense of what's right and what's wrong."

And my advice to him was -

never lose that passion,

never lose that anger.

You all know the feeling.

You're tired.

You've had a really long day.

A tough week maybe.

But the next day you get up and get on with it.

You keep going - because what you do matters.

It's a lesson for me as well.

When I was campaigning to become general secretary,

there were days when I asked, “what am I doing?

This is a huge job; can I do this?”

And my fantastic team would say, “of course you can”.

And thanks to their support and encouragement, I’d feel better and keep going.

We all deserve better.

And that’s why we joined a union,

to come together with like-minded people,

to work together to make the world a better and fairer place.

I promise you I’ll never lose my passion for that.

Thank you.