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Printed and published by UNISON Centre, 130 Euston Road, London NW1 2AY
CU/November 2021/26634/UNP16028/3721/15,000

A year to remember



What a year 2022 has turned out to be for UNISON members working in the energy sector. You could say “never a dull moment”, but that would apply to most years for our energy members. This year has been even more memorable.

The term “energy crisis” is now in everyday use for the first time since the mid-1970s, when oil price rises shook the world. The crisis of the past year, which led to a cost-of-living crisis, did not just appear out of nowhere. It was a long time in the making. While the Russian invasion of the Ukraine has clearly exacerbated the situation in a significant way, many of our problems stem from the government’s obsession with markets, a lack of national planning and a good dose of complacency.

Why else do we continue to have some of the worst housing in Europe for energy efficiency? If the UK government had implemented the findings of our “Warm Homes into the Future” report in 2015, a programme of home insulation would be halfway completed at a total cost of some £68.5 billion or £4.5 billion per annum. This total amount is considerably less than the recently announced government support package for energy consumers.

At the time we launched the report, we were told that - despite it being self-financing in the medium to long term - it wasn’t feasible to suggest such upfront sums to kickstart this important work. That is an example of the government’s short-term thinking. For it coughs up billions when its policies go wrong. The billions being committed now to help households pay their energy bills is money that is literally going to go up in smoke (or emissions).

UNISON, with many others, has also argued for a total overhaul of the UK energy market - especially the energy retailers. We said to the regulator and politicians from all sides that the retail market was a disaster waiting to happen and that our members were paying for these errors with their jobs. It turns out that once again, we were spot on. So having witnessed the collapse of so many new entrants, who were not fit to supply energy and whose behaviour was questionable, we are left picking up the tab (see page 7).

Energy is a public good and should be treated as such. Public ownership of energy retail would cost around £2.5 billion, but would give every consumer in the country a fair deal. It would create the conditions that would allow us to start our energy-efficiency programme, door-to-door, street-by-street.

Let nobody say such measures are too costly or too risky for the taxpayer. The past years have shown how small-minded our policy makers have become. Let’s have some ambition for the UK and let’s get to work providing energy security, warm homes and a system fit for the challenges ahead. We cannot expect things to happen overnight, which is precisely why we cannot delay a minute longer.

Matt Lay

National officer for energy

Victory for UNISON workers who refused to handle Russian gas

While the world looked on with horror at the unfolding war in Ukraine, UNISON workers stood firm against unloading gas from Russian tankers

What is LNG?

Liquefied natural gas (LNG) is becoming an increasingly popular way to transport gas as the energy crisis deepens and Russian gas is diverted away from European pipelines. When chilled to -160°C , natural gas becomes a liquid and takes up 1/60th of the amount of space it uses when in gas form.

Billions of pounds worth of natural gas is now being transported across the globe in this way.

National Grid's Isle of Grain terminal is one of the biggest of its kind in Europe. Its largest tank is the size of the Royal Albert Hall and, when the site is operating at full strength, it can supply 25% of gas to the whole country at any given time.

The two tankers - the Boris Vilkitsky and the Fedor Litke - contained enough liquid gas to supply the UK for up to 12 days, so their rerouting was a major victory for UNISON members.

"It was a fantastic show of determination. We forced the government's hand."

Last March, UNISON energy workers at the Isle of Grain terminal were faced with the prospect of having to handle a huge import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia.

Peter Read, branch chair, who has worked at the Medway terminal for around 16 years, explained: "I was off shift, when I started getting messages from concerned members. Two ships - the Boris Vilkitsky and the Fedor Litke - were due to arrive at the National Grid terminal carrying Russian gas and some of the members were passionate about not touching the cargo, given the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine.

"These staff were determined to show their support for the Ukrainian people and uphold the sanctions imposed against Russia."

UNISON represents around 200 workers at the Isle of Grain importation terminal, which is 90% of the operational workforce.

Only that week, the government had passed a law banning ships with any Russian connection from all UK ports. However there was a loophole in the law and ships registered in other countries weren't covered. Both the Boris Vilkitsky and Fedor Litke are Russia-owned, but they sail under the flag of Cyprus. (Many ship owners opt to sail ships under a flag of another country for taxation or regulatory reasons.)

It rapidly became clear that the majority of workers weren't happy dealing with the cargo - some passionately so. But concerned that staff could face disciplinary action, UNISON worked with the branch and National Grid to get the government to clarify the situation.

Matt Lay, energy officer, said: "The workforce didn't back down. The



"Staff were determined to show their support for Ukraine," said branch chair Peter Read.

situation attracted worldwide attention and there was so much pressure for the ship to be turned away. Our members showed their support for Ukraine and identified a legal loophole that needed to be addressed."

Read said that National Grid was caught between a rock and a hard place. "They had no idea what would happen if they cancelled the delivery. They were worried they would face sanctions for breaking contracts. However, they did categorically assure UNISON that no worker at the site would be compelled to unload the gas if the ship did dock."

Lay added: "The story was picked up by the media everywhere. Our members were determined to uphold the sanctions imposed against Russia. By attracting widespread coverage, we forced the government's hand and avoided a potential confrontation."

The Fedor Litke was diverted away from the terminal early on and after three days, the Boris Vilkitsky was eventually sent to France. Boris Johnson's government later confirmed that no further deliveries of Russian gas were expected.



Photo: Labour Party

Labour leader Kier Starmer meeting with wind energy workers.

Wind and nuclear – the power of the future

No single source of energy will dominate future energy supply – and both wind power and nuclear will be essential in reaching net zero. But what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

On any day, at any moment, Britain's energy comes from a range of sources and the balance is constantly shifting. Wind, gas, nuclear, bio mass, solar are a 'pick and mix' of providers that National Grid draws upon – depending upon the weather, demand and cost.

At UNISON's recent energy seminar in Newcastle, presentations from EDF UK and RenewableUK, set out the importance of wind and nuclear to net-zero targets.

Rachel Glaving, commercial director at EDF Energy UK, said: "We have an energy 'trilemma' – rather than dilemma. The cost, the sustainability

and the security of each green power source has to be assessed and they all have a trade-off. No one single source of energy will dominate in the future – as coal and gas did in the past."

The pros and cons of each energy source have been known for many years, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the soaring rise in gas and oil prices and accelerating climate change have shifted the debate. The importance of energy security is now much higher up the agenda.

Pictured above is the Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer with the CEO at RenewableUK agreeing upon the urgent need for onshore wind farms in England to go ahead.

THE FACTS

NUCLEAR POWER

EDF UK owns and operates Britain's eight nuclear power stations, sometimes described as "the workhorses of UK energy" as they produce energy consistently for around 91% of the year.

Nuclear provides an average of around 16% of Britain's energy.

Sixty-one thousand people work in the nuclear industry. Many of the jobs are highly skilled and there is a skills shortage. The workforce is currently 5% women, which the industry acknowledges is "not enough" (see page 8).

All the current nuclear power stations were built in the 1960s and none of them will operate after 2028, apart from Sizewell C in Suffolk, if a new reactor is built there.

Hinkley Point C, Somerset, is the first new nuclear power station since the 1960s. It is due to start operating in 2027, with the capacity to power around six million homes for the next 60 years – equivalent to three existing power stations.

WIND POWER

Offshore wind power is expanding faster than any other green energy sector. The goals for offshore wind power have increased significantly in recent years.

Wind power is the cheapest source of new power for the UK, generating electricity at a cost that is five times lower than gas.

Wind currently produces 12GW of electricity each year. The aim is to increase this to 50GW by 2030 – increasing capacity by five times. This will include floating offshore wind farms.

Thirty-one thousand people work in offshore wind – 19,500 directly and 11,000 indirectly. By 2030, it is forecast that around 100,000 people will work in the sector. The workforce is currently 18% women and there is a shortage of skilled employees.

All new offshore wind farms are being built in Scotland as England has strict planning restrictions and the government currently has no plans to review them.

NUCLEAR POWER

ADVANTAGES

Clean energy. Nuclear is a clean, low carbon energy that provides pollution-free power with no greenhouse gas emissions.

Low running costs. Once reactors are in operation, the running costs are lower than wind and solar.

Security. Energy security is becoming increasingly important. The reality of climate change and soaring energy costs have brought the nuclear option back to the table. Nuclear power is a secure, home-grown technology.

Stability. Nuclear is a stable power source that is not dependent on the weather. It can be purchased by suppliers in advance and so is far less subject to market changes. This makes it an important element in reducing fuel poverty.

Low emissions. Over the lifetime of a power station, from construction to decommissioning – CO₂ produced is around 5.5g per MW – exactly the same as wind generation.

DISADVANTAGES

The cost. Nuclear power stations cost billions to build and have a reputation for going over time and over budget. The current estimated costs for Hinkley Point C are around £25 billion – making the project two years late and 50% over budget. However, this is the first nuclear power station to be built to UK requirements for a generation and if more stations were commissioned, lessons would have been learnt and prices would fall.

Environmental impact. The highly radioactive and toxic by-product from nuclear reactors can remain radioactive for tens of thousands of years. However the environmental impact of nuclear waste now seems an easier problem to solve than climate change. This is because 90% of the nuclear waste can be recycled.

Security. Opposers still see nuclear energy as entwined with nuclear weapons and worry that as nuclear power becomes globally available, the technology could be used by corrupt governments to further their aims.

Accidents. When nuclear does fail, it can fail spectacularly, such as at Chernobyl. However, this risk is very small compared to the impact of climate change with no intervention.

WIND POWER

ADVANTAGES

Affordable. Clean, cheap and easily produced when compared with other forms of energy production. Once a turbine is complete and installed, it doesn't need to be fuelled or connected to power so has much lower running costs than other renewable energies.

New technology. Technology is improving all the time. New designs will generate more electricity, require less maintenance, and run more quietly and safely.

Low emissions. Wind energy only releases greenhouse gases indirectly, during the manufacturing and transport of the wind turbines, as well as during the installation process.

Capacity. The amount of energy produced by wind varies with the weather, but on November 3, wind produced more than 50% (54%) of Britain's total electricity for the first time. This was a new record for wind generation.

DISADVANTAGES

Unpredictability. Wind blows at different times, at different speeds. This makes it difficult to predict the amount of energy that can be collected at any given time.

Storage. Wind power cannot be stored during normal operation. It is possible to add batteries, hydrogen fuel cells or add other power storage methods, such as compressed air, but all these methods are expensive.

Distribution. Due to stricter English planning laws, all current and planned onshore wind farms are in Scotland – hundreds of miles from the cities requiring the electricity. The added transportation costs make wind power less cost effective for some suppliers.

Threat to wildlife. Migrating birds and bats can be injured or killed if they hit the blades.

Energy in crisis – a year to remember

Oil and gas giants such as BP and Shell are earning billions in excess profits every quarter, while households are struggling to pay their bills

“We’ve got to shout out that our energy system is not good enough”

Decades of privatisation, energy companies going bust, poor regulation, fuel poverty and a long-term lack of investment in net-zero. All these factors placed the UK in the worst possible position at the start of the year when Russia invaded Ukraine.

“Don’t be fooled into thinking our current problems are all the fault of the war. We started the year in the worst possible shape,” explained Matt Lay, energy officer, when talking to members at the recent UNISON energy seminar. “The system is broken and the country was in a very bad way in January even before the Russian invasion. We were already heading toward an energy crisis and, as a nation, we weren’t prepared.”

While Ovo recommended its customers do star jumps and E.ON sent customers a pair of socks to keep warm, UNISON members were on the frontline, dealing with worried and sometimes abusive customers who can’t afford to heat their homes, bathe or cook this winter.

And throughout the year, UNISON has been involved in detailed and often prolonged negotiations with employers to secure the best deals for members during these difficult times.

These have included:

- ▶ saving 300 jobs at OVO when it announced huge redundancies. UNISON negotiated to reduce redundancies from 2,000 to 1,700
- ▶ a two-year pay deal worth 6% plus a £1,100 cash payment at E.ON. The company agreed to bring forward a 7.5% pay anniversary because of the energy crisis
- ▶ National Grid accepting a pay deal worth between 4% and 7% after months of negotiation, plus an unconsolidated bonus
- ▶ negotiating for all staff employed at Xcel Energy to be offered a job at British Gas when they went bust.
- ▶ Centrica introducing an energy allowance and 15% tariff on bills to help directly with energy bills this winter
- ▶ Cadent staff members receiving a collective bonus of 4.49%

Lay concluded by saying: “If there’s one thing I would say to our members moving forward, it’s that we’ve got to shout out that our energy system is not good enough. We have the most ridiculous retail system in the world. Everything is disjointed. Everything is fragmented and our politicians have got to lift their game. As citizens of this country, we deserve better and we need to demand it.”

FUTURE PLANNING

For years, UNISON has consistently campaigned, in a pragmatic and practical way, to improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon. Yet while UNISON has been supporting members and focused upon building a Just Transition to net-zero, the government has been focused on in-fighting and wrecking the economy.

Lay explained that: “For years UNISON has been calling for the government to invest in energy efficiency

and insulating people’s homes. If it had been ambitious and looked to the future, we would be in a very different position today. Instead, as the energy crisis hits home this winter, it will be those living in worst houses shouldering the biggest increases in energy prices. It is completely unjust and unfair.

“Even worse, progress toward net zero is slowing and a lack of funding and public cuts make it even less likely to happen. The

government has now paused progress on taking the electricity system operator into public ownership and is failing spectacularly in meeting its own targets. It has a target to have 600,000 air-source heat pumps by 2028, but at the moment, there are barely 3,000.

“It’s all proclamations but no actions. At the very time when we need to be growing jobs, growing apprenticeships, training and investment – it isn’t happening.”

COLLAPSE OF ENERGY FIRMS

In 2021, 27 energy companies went bust and three more went out of business in January 2022 due to poor business models, which couldn't withstand the rise in energy prices.

The fallout is costing the tax payers billions of pounds – with nothing to show for their money – and the final bill is rising all the time. The latest figures suggest the public will be picking up a total bill of around £4 billion, which is partly being paid for by an increase in the standing charge cost on energy bills.

Lay scoffed: "When energy companies in this country are making money they are privatised, but when they go bust, they're mutualised and we all have to pay the losses."

One of the many uncertain business practices pursued by the newer 'disruptor' energy companies of the last few years – most of which have now gone bust – was using customers' credit balances as an interest-free credit card.

Lay explained: "Most customers pay a set amount on direct debit payments every month. This means that customers build up overpayments during the summer, which they then draw upon in the winter months. These 'disruptor' energy companies used this money as working capital. Then when the companies failed, the tax payer had to pick up all these obligations and had to pay these costs. It's an absolute scandal."

UNISON, the big six energy companies and consumer groups have campaigned for this practice to be outlawed and for the money from customers' bill to be ring-fenced. OFGEM has finally issued a ruling to stop the practice after huge political pressure, but it is only temporary and could be overturned at any time.



ROCKETING PRICE CAP

While France with its state-owned energy company EDF and fleet of nuclear power stations has set a price cap of 4%, consumers in the UK face crippling price cap hikes of almost 300%. In April 2021, the price cap was £1,138 and by October 2022 it had risen to £3,549.

Lay lamented that: "If prices had only increased by 50% as EDF predicted last December, then consumers would have been in a much stronger position."

"The government has now introduced the energy price guarantee to reduce the unit cost of gas and electricity to consumers but with such huge hikes this winter, millions of households are having to choose between putting the heating on or cooking a meal this winter and the future is full of uncertainty."

BIG PROFITS

While customers are facing the worst fuel poverty of generations, the gas and oil producers are currently reaping the rewards of political unrest and are making billions. The excess (or extra) profits of gas producers will amount to around £170 billion in total this year.

When Russia diverted gas eastward, the price of gas soared overnight to £4.50 a therm. A couple of years ago, gas prices were 40p a therm.

Lay said: "The debate about excess profits is interesting. The gas producing companies based their economic projections on gas being 40p a therm. They make healthy profits at this level. Then the price suddenly goes up to £5.50. It doesn't seem right that they should complain when people say some of that excess profit should be taxed. It is money they've gained for doing absolutely nothing."

Unlocking untapped potential

As we move to a net zero economy, the energy sector will face a huge challenge – finding and recruiting people with the necessary technical skills. One way to do this, is to make use of its huge pool of female workers, who tend to work in call centres and other office-based roles. Many of these would like to switch to operational roles, such as installing smart meters and repairing equipment in people's homes, if they were given the opportunity. UNISON is working to help them achieve this goal.

“Women must be at the heart of the energy sector”



At a recent event at the Houses of Parliament, UNISON launched its Charter for Good Practice to help employers in the energy sector to support women to move into these traditionally male-dominated roles (see box). The charter is based on the results of a survey carried out by UNISON, EDF and Centrica, which asked female employees of the two energy companies whether they would like to move into these roles, and what barriers they faced in doing so. A massive 90% of those surveyed said they would be more likely to make this transition if they were given suitable training and support.

Kerry McCarthy MP, shadow minister for climate change and net zero, opened the event by talking about Labour's Green Prosperity Plan, which aims to create hundreds of thousands of new green jobs, insulate 19 million homes and establish a state-owned energy provider.

She said: “We need to be able to hit the ground running when we get into power.” And she praised UNISON's charter, saying: “Women must be at

the heart of the energy sector.”

Matt Lay, energy officer, said at the event: “There are not enough workers in the industry with the right skills to get anywhere near the numbers we need for decarbonisation. Our aim is to create pathways and opportunities for women in the energy sector to be able to take up these jobs. It's only by engaging and getting women into those roles that we can get anywhere near net zero.”

Lay quoted some of the comments made by women who took part in the survey, for example: “I'd love to move into an operational role as I have a STEM background, but I worry about the hours because of family commitments.”

Jill Shedden, chief people officer at Centrica, said the main barriers faced by women wanting to move into operational roles were juggling training with childcare, a change in work patterns, concerns about job security, safety concerns about working in people's homes and the male-dominated culture of operational work. The charter lists a range of measures that employers could introduce to overcome these barriers.

Philippa Burt, human resources director at EDF Energy, also speaking at the event, said: “We need to increase the number of new entrants into the sector by three-fold. It’s not easy to find those people so where better to look than at people who already work for us [in office-based roles] and understand the business.”

She added that the new nuclear power station EDF is building at Hinkley Point C in Somerset gives the company “the opportunity to do something new – to create a power station that is an attractive place for women to work. We can think more creatively about things like gender-neutral parenting policies and flexible work patterns.”

Chi Onwurah, MP, shadow minister

for science, research and innovation, told attendees about her years spent working as a telecommunications engineer before becoming an MP:

“I was often the only woman in the workplace, the only person of colour and the only person from a working-class background.”

“What’s important about what UNISON is doing today is that it is recognising the potential of the transition to net zero,” she said. “Labour’s industrial strategy is looking how we can use the great climate change challenge to create good jobs - jobs that you can raise a family on. We want to work with unions and the education sector to create a fairer, greener future.”

Charter for Good Practice

The Charter for Good Practice for Supporting and Developing Women in Energy Customer Facing Roles asks employers to “recognise that employees’ positive experience of career transition will depend on a positive transformation of the workforce culture in parts of the industry that have traditionally been gender imbalanced”.

It goes on to ask them to “work jointly with our recognised trade unions to improve the gender balance within parts of our business that are less diverse” and to “develop appropriate plans and policies to support career transitions for women”. It lists a range of supportive measures that employers could adopt, such as:

- Career fairs and other engagement opportunities
- Training and development programmes
- Taster sessions or short trials in available operational roles without detriment
- Longer term operational work placements and secondments
- Provision of mentoring and ongoing support
- Flexible work patterns and locations



We've got to think big

The cost of living crisis can't deflect from the challenge of "creating a fairer, greener economy," said Ed Miliband, the shadow secretary of state for climate change, speaking at UNISON's energy conference in Brighton last summer.



The change to net-zero carbon emissions is "not about putting a green coat of paint on an unfair, unequal economy, but about the fundamental transfer of wealth power and income to working people and their families".

Outlining Labour's energy policy if the party gains power at the next election, he asked: "Are we really going to go from a high-carbon unjust, unfair, unequal country to a zero-carbon unjust, unfair, unequal country? No."

"Lots of people talk about how this is an energy bills crisis for consumers, and it is – but it's also a crisis for you."

Miliband acknowledged that, while

the energy crisis is global in nature, the UK is uniquely badly placed to cope and act and that the energy system here is a "broken free market".

"The sharp practice of fly-by-night companies has to end," he said. "We need to replace this broken system with an energy system run in the public interest. It's not about ideology, it's about value for money and sensible, pragmatic choices."

And Miliband took aim at the Conservative government saying, "The Tories mouth the words but don't deliver."

He went on to outline how there is an opportunity in the crisis with hundreds of thousands of jobs available, and the opportunity to

redesign the energy system with billions of pounds of investment over the next 10 years to make it happen. "But this is only going to work if we work with the trade unions to make it happen."

Finishing his speech, he compared the challenge faced by the 1945 Labour government, saying that "the UK was a country ravaged by war and massively in debt. What they could have done was lower their sights but they raised them and created the national health service."

"And we have to raise our ambitions not lower our ambitions. Yes, there's a cost of living crisis, yes there is a climate crisis, but we've got to think big, not small."



And the award goes to...

The Mike Jeram Trophy is presented each year to the energy branch with the highest membership growth. This year, it was won by Gas Branch Scotland and the award was presented by Matt Lay, energy officer.

"Congratulations to Gas Branch Scotland for your outstanding achievement in exceedingly difficult times," said Lay.

Pictured (L-R): Matthew Lay, Kristopher Reid, John Fallon, David Steele, Lindsay McNaught, Neil Tomany, Paul O'Donnell, Louise Andrews.



My belief in social justice

From the priesthood to trade unionism, Willie Docherty of Scottish Electricity Branch says that social justice has been at the heart of his life.

“Before Scottish Power, I trained to be a priest for six years”

When did you first get involved with UNISON?

It was 2000. I had just completed my first day's training as a steward. I remember we were staying at a hotel in Glasgow and we'd gone to the pub for a drink, when it was announced on the news that Donald Dewar, Scotland's inaugural First Minister, had died.

I didn't actually start working for Scottish Power though until I was 33. I trained for six years to be a priest.

I'm not from a trade union family and I grew up in the Thatcher years, so all I knew of trade unions were the strikes that were going on in the 1980s. I didn't have a clue what trade unions were about and it's an even bigger problem today amongst many people – especially younger employees.

It was never my intention to be a trade unionist, but after I started working for Scottish Power, they went through a huge expansion. The company was growing all the time when they started providing gas, as well as electricity. I got asked if I'd like to be a rep – and then it just started from there. I've now been an active UNISON member for 22 years.

What motivates you to be a UNISON activist?

Before joining Scottish Power and UNISON, I trained to be a priest for six years. Of course they're very different roles in life, but a common thread throughout my life and my motivation for the work I do as an activist, is my belief in social justice.

Sometimes when we're doing training, we get into discussions about justice, morality and right and wrong. With religion and trade unionism you may come at things from a different direction, but you often end up with the same result – social justice.

What is the Just Transition commission?

The Scottish Government created the Just Transition commission two or three years ago to help plan the country's transition to a greener, net zero economy, whilst trying to ensure job security for workers in the energy sector. It's also to address issues like infrastructure and making sure the costs of decarbonisation do not impact

on those least able to afford it. The commission has members from across the energy and environment sectors, including the STUC (Scottish Trade Union Congress), Friends of the Earth and other groups.

As a UNISON activist, my role is to work with the other trade unions and civil servants and to share our findings with the Just Transition commission. Dave Moxham, deputy general secretary of the STUC and other trade unionists are on the commission and working with them ensures our issues are on the agenda.

Each year a report is published on the commission's findings. Our main aim at the moment is to be realistic about what can be achieved. There are so many promises and figures bandied about, it's important to be honest about what can be done and in what timescale.

I also represent UNISON in the Scottish Labour Party, as they have plans for their own energy transition commission and they asked UNISON energy members to have a seat at the table. It's so important for UNISON and other trade unions to be involved in these decision-making groups, as it is their findings that will form the basis of future government policies.

In Scotland, Just Transition is taken more seriously than anywhere else, but there's so much more to be done – particularly bringing together different industries and different needs. For example, the amount of windfarms in Scotland is a big bugbear for the country. All wind farms in Britain are in Scotland – but only about 5% of turbines are manufactured there. When the steel industry was closing down a few years ago, huge companies disappeared and jobs could have been saved. If there had been a just transition, steel manufacturers in Scotland could have made the parts for turbines.

What do you do to relax?

I like to read, particularly crime novels and historical books. I also like going to the theatre. Last weekend, I went with Lindsay McNaught (Chair of UNISON Energy Group) to see Mary Poppins in London, which was brilliant.

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