Unite’s fourth policy conference – where Unite delegates formulated the union’s key policies for the next two years – took place in Brighton in the second week of July.

In his opening remarks Unite’s executive committee chair, Tony Woodhouse (pictured), laid out Unite’s mission – to protect and improve pay and conditions for working people.

He noted that the landscape had changed since the union had met at the Rules Conference last year – for one, the Tory government had now passed its “vindictive” trade union Act.

“That they need to resort to such tactics shows that the trade union movement in this country – and Unite – remains a force to be reckoned with,” Woodhouse noted.

“Despite the laws they try to strangle us with, Unite will make sure it carries on using every lever we can to win for our members.”

He highlighted the plight of steelworkers and emphasised Unite’s commitment to them.

Woodhouse also paid tribute to Unite’s young members, who for the first time came as full delegates, as well the conference’s many international speakers, including two of the Miami Five who were wrongly imprisoned in America and were freed thanks to a global campaign led by Unite. “Our union has a proud history of being international in our outlook,” he said. “And we will carry on doing so.”

Woodhouse closed by noting that delegates’ decisions made during the conference would “be taken to workplaces and will make a difference to millions of families, to their livelihoods and their prospects in life.”
MIAMI FIVE

‘Miracle’ opportunity

In an historic appearance two of the Miami Five – anti-terrorism campaigners who were wrongly accused of espionage and spent nearly two decades in a US prison – received an emotional standing ovation at policy conference.

Rene Gonzales and Gerardo Hernández, freed in 2011 and 2014 respectively following a global campaign in which Unite played a pivotal role, thanked Unite’s leaders and members for their tireless support.

Unite general secretary Len McCluskey, said he was “incredibly proud” of Unite’s campaign, and he paid tribute to Tony Woodley, former Unite joint-general secretary, who he said drove the campaign to the free the Five with “incredible energy and determination” – as did Hernández who gave special thanks for Woodley’s many prison visits.

He also hailed the many Unite members who participated in the campaign. Gonzales called the opportunity to come to speak at the Unite policy conference a “miracle”, considering not only the struggle they faced in securing their freedom but also in securing visas to come to the UK – their applications were originally denied by the Home Office.

“Fighting against such hatred takes a lot of strength,” Gonzales added. “A great deal of that strength came from British unions – which started with Unite. But Cuba still needs your support to celebrate the day we win with the end of the blockade and when the US gives back the territory of Guantanamo Bay.”

IN BRIEF

STEEL

Save our steel

Delegates carried a series of motions emphasising the need to work with various organisations, including steel unions, the Labour party and grassroots organisations to save the beleagured industry.

Conference heard about the dangers of China being granted market economy status – a motion was carried calling on Unite to lobby governments to protect key industries such as steel should China achieve this status.

Delegates called for Unite to lobby the wider Labour party to adopt all the union’s #SaveOurSteel campaign objectives, including tackling Chinese dumping and ensuring government contracts buy British steel, among other aims.

MANUFACTURING

Strategy call

A strategic plan for UK manufacturing is needed to tackle its steep decline, conference heard.

The need to ensure Labour develops this strategic manufacturing plan – a possibility after a future Labour victory under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, who has explicitly endorsed the idea – was also highlighted.

Delegates supported the call for Unite to lobby for government funded research and development linked to high quality jobs and apprenticeships.

In the absence of Tory government support for manufacturing, conference resolved to instruct Unite to encourage and support members in taking direct action to save threatened industry.
In a dynamic keynote address Unite general secretary Len McCluskey emphasised the importance of unity at a time in which, he said, “our country is riven by the EU referendum.”

“Our movement is divided – bitterly and unnecessarily,” he said. “Millions of working people are looking for urgent answers to the crisis engulfing us.

He pointed to the “car factories and steel plants now under a shadow, our oil and gas industry being ravaged,” as well as our “threatened public service and finance sectors,” among others who need the support of Unite more now than ever before.

McCluskey hailed the main victories Unite has had this year, including securing millions in compensation for blacklisted workers, campaigning against the EU-US trade deal TTIP, and successfully pressuring restaurants into changing their tipping policies.

He pointed to Unite’s successful leverage campaigns as well as its political campaign against the trade union Bill which helped defeat some of the bill’s worst measures.

He paid tribute to assistant general secretary Steve Turner and officer Luke Primarolo and others involved in the campaign against Sports Direct and its draconian work practices.

McCluskey closed by emphasising what sets Unite apart – its ability to “reach out into the community” and “bring those pushed onto the margins of society into our movement.

“We reach agreements where possible and fight for our members,” he said. “We debate difference and we cherish unity. We stand proud in the British, Irish and international labour movement. We have much still to do my friends, and we will do it together.”

To cheers and a rousing standing ovation, McCluskey concluded, “While we remain united, we will remain strong.”

Defend our jobs

In the debate on defence diversification and Trident, Unite policy conference made it clear that defending and securing the jobs of defence workers involved in the successor submarine programme was its priority.

But Unite also castigated successive governments for their failure to develop a robust defence diversification strategy that would safeguard defence jobs.

Moving an executive statement Unite general secretary Len McCluskey said, “We can and do, in this statement, reassert our broad principles regarding opposition to nuclear weapons and our strong support for defence diversification.

“But we know that we do not have a government in place that has any interest in either of those principles. Here in 2016, a vote against building those submarines would have only one immediate effect – destruction of jobs.”

Linda Pollock (pictured left) from Scotland stood in staunch support of the executive statement. She argued that unions must stand up for all jobs in all sectors.

“Our members expect us to defend their jobs,” she said. “That’s why they pay their dues. Jobs first; politics second.”

Ian Bestwick (pictured above) an aerospace worker from the East Midlands said the debate was “actually about the renewal of submarines [Successor programme] and not about re-newing Trident.”

Darren Reynolds, Wales said, “The EC statement has made it clear the union exists to defend jobs. We need to know our union puts jobs above political ideals.” The executive statement was carried.
IN BRIEF

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Tackling the issues

Improving health and safety was an issue close to many delegates’ hearts. Conference carried motions including those on bullying and harassment, mental health, fibromyalgia and shift working among others.

Unite delegate Sarah Hacker moved on fibromyalgia, calling on Unite to create an awareness information pack for little understood, long-term condition, whose sufferers are often discriminated against in work.

Conference heard too of the impact of mental health problems such as stress. Delegates voted in favour of Unite training and supporting reps in tackling mental health issues in the workplace.

AGENCY WORKERS

Organise now plan

The increase in agency workers prompted delegates at policy conference to debate strategies for organising these workers.

Unite North West delegate Ronnie Evans pointed to the fact that the nature of agency work has changed dramatically over the years. “Before people took on agency work a day here and there so they could have extra money,” he explained. “Now people are trying to scrape together a living exclusively from agency work.”

The motion, overwhelmingly carried, called for Unite to develop an organising strategy for agency workers.

PUBLIC SECTOR PRIVATISATION

Accountable services call

Fighting against privatisation of public services was an important discussion for delegates who supported a call to raise awareness and challenge commissioning bodies on transparency and public accountability.

Yorkshire ambulance worker Debbie Wilkinson (pictured) said, “Public services should be accountable to the public they service. The NHS should not just be the preferred provider – it should be the only provider.”

Health visitor Suzanne Lowe expressed concern on the effects such privatisation has on children. “Health shouldn’t be prioritised differently based on where you live. We must demand our funding back – families deserve it.”

TUC GS FRANCES O’GRADY

Hope over hate

TUC general secretary Frances O’Grady (pictured) addressed conference in a speech in which she lauded Unite’s work and outlined what the trade movement will need to fight today’s attacks on working people.

“Unite reps and campaigns make a real difference,” she said. “From the Fight for Five campaign to your wonderful work on all strands of equality, this union is a powerful force for good.”

After the recent vote to leave the EU, O’Grady laid out what she believed were three key priorities for trade unions in “a post-Brexit world”.

One goal was ensuring workers don’t pay the price of Brexit, which “demands action to secure our economy, raise productivity and win investment.”

She also emphasised the importance of “defending hard-won rights”. She noted how the movement had “already shown our mettle on the government’s trade union Act”, including winning key concessions on measures restricting check-off, facility time, picket lines and unions’ political funds.

But, she said, the campaign is “not over yet” and pledged to continue fighting the Act in its entirety.

A third key priority, she argued, was “winning a fair deal for young people. They paid the heaviest price for the crash, recession and living standards crisis,” O’Grady said. “Trade unions need to be there for them.”

She argued the road forward would be hard and urged trade unionists to “stick together”.

“Let’s stay true to our trade union values,” O’Grady concluded. “Let’s stand up for what we believe in. Let’s ensure hope triumphs over hate.”
‘A force for good’

To three separate standing ovations, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn addressed delegates.

Corbyn confirmed his and Labour’s commitment to the trade union movement. “Strong and effective trade unions make an enormous difference to people’s lives,” he said. “Trade unions are an intrinsic part of our society, a force for good.”

He praised many of Unite’s recent victories, including its Fair Tips campaign which may soon lead to a change in the law on tipping, and its work with Sports Direct workers who face shocking exploitation. “We need stronger trade unions not weaker,” he said.

“I want us to have positive rights at work rather than the imposition of the extremely draconian anti-trade union laws we have,” Corbyn noted.

He restated a pledge he’s made repeatedly, to rousing applause – “The next Labour government will repeal the trade union Act.”

Corbyn noted that Labour has offered “a bold opposition”, one which has already secured many victories including forcing the government to turn back on cuts to tax credits, cuts to disability benefit and the forced academisation of schools. He outlined Labour’s vision for the future, which included a robust industrial strategy, public investment, and strong employment rights.

“We can and will create a better society through our action together, through our unity together, our principles together,” he said. Corbyn concluded to a standing ovation.

“That is what makes us different, that is what makes us strong. That’s what the unity between trade unions and the Labour Party is all about.”

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Robust approach call

Unite committed itself to a strategy to fight privatisation and outsourcing of local authority services. The carried executive statement sought to mitigate the impact of central government cuts through “redefining the definition of adequate reserves, along with taking a robust approach to budget setting”.

The debate focused on how the union can best fight Tory cuts. Moving the executive statement, Unite EC member Dick Banks said the statement “sets out a fighting back strategy.”

“This is one piece of the campaign going forward. Alongside this is detailed guidance on local government finance that sets out what measures can be taken by councils – working with us not against us – to mitigate the impact of the cuts.”

He hailed a new trade union / Labour agreement, recently endorsed by the LGA Labour AGM, a step which he called “unprecedented.”

“Be proud that it’s Unite who brought the Labour Party to the table – the leadership of both the shadow cabinet and LGA – so that whenever and wherever possible we work together to defeat the Tories,” he said.

“At last we can stand side by side with Labour on a firm anti-austerity platform.”
IN BRIEF

INTERNATIONAL

Solidarity

Global solidarity played a key role at conference, with delegates hearing a series of carried motions on international campaigns, including on the fight against international trade deals such as TTIP and CETA, as well as the importance of cross-Atlantic solidarity in Workers Uniting and the need to support the people and progressive forces of Palestine, Syria, Turkey and Colombia.

A motion was also carried on supporting BAEM workers internationally.

One key international speaker was the United Steelworkers’ Fred Redmond who called on delegates to “fight together for a vision for the future” – one which is based on “solidarity, tolerance and freedom.”

WORK, VOICE, PAY

Cornerstone

Unite organising executive officer Sharon Graham (pictured) gave a presentation on Unite’s campaign, Work, Voice, Pay which forms the cornerstone of the union’s industrial strategy.

Delegates heard how the programme informs the direction of each of Unite’s goals in delivering its work protecting members – including securing good jobs and decent work, ensuring workers have a strong and effective voice, and gaining decent pay and conditions.

Sharon said Unite has produced a range of Work, Voice, Pay guides to assist reps in including guides for making pay claims and gaining workplace recognition.

SPORTS DIRECT

Justice fight must go on

After watching an inspirational film on Unite’s campaign at Sports Direct, conference debated and carried a motion calling for continued support in the fight for decent and fair conditions.

In moving Sam Rosenthal, East Midlands (pictured), explained what workers face at Sports Direct. He said, “There is a culture of fear.

“Take too long in the toilet, be off sick, chat too much – and you might get sacked. And all for pay below the minimum wage.

“This is the best campaign to emerge from the union in a long time. But the fight still goes on.”

BREXIT

Seat at table call

Unite policy conference delegates backed a statement on Europe from the union’s executive council, which demanded trade union input into ‘Brexit’ talks.

Warning that workers must not pay the price for Brexit the statement said Unite would, “Oppose a ‘Brexit’ that reduces trade union rights, excludes Britain from the EU single market and fails to deal fairly with the difficult issue of the free movement of labour, which requires further debate in the trade union movement.” In the carried statement, delegates focused on three key priorities of defending members’ jobs, protecting employment rights and opposing the racist backlash unleashed after the referendum.

Moving, Unite assistant general secretary Steve Turner (pictured above) said, “We will demand a seat at any ‘Brexit’ table.

During the debate many speakers expressed disgust and concern about racist attacks on EU workers. Conference heard from London and Eastern region’s Alexandra Tomczak. She told delegates, “It’s not fine to blame immigration. Don’t let hate divide.”

Members facing the prospects of border controls being enforced again also expressed their concerns, including Wendy Clouter from Gibraltar and Liam Gallagher from Ireland.

Steve Turner replied, “We will never allow the scapegoating of migrants or refugees. We are incredibly proud of the diversity of our union.”
Solidarity at the heart

Shadow chancellor John McDonnell laid out the Labour party’s single-minded “ambition to radically transform society” at policy conference.

He explained the sweeping measures the party has taken since he was appointed shadow chancellor after Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s election to “restore economic credibility to the Labour Party.”

At the heart of Labour’s economic policy, McDonnell explained, is long-term state investment that draws out private investment and in so doing rebalances the economy and brings broad, shared prosperity to all.

He credited Unite for contributing to a central plank of Labour’s new economic policy. “This union for years now has been arguing for what it is that we need now – a long-term industrial strategy.”

Like Corbyn, McDonnell confirmed a key Labour pledge – “In the first 100 days in government we will scrap the trade union Act. It will go.”

He warned that new prime minister Theresa May’s “warm words” for working people in a recent speech should not be trusted. “She’s voted for every cut and supported policies that have turned the country into “food bank Britain. The time to get rid of the Tories is coming”

Clarifying the Labour party’s position on various policies, McDonnell answered questions from delegates.

When asked by delegate Mike Hedges whether the Labour party would reject spending limits imposed by the Tory government, McDonnell said that it would.

“We have our own fiscal rule,” he said. “Yes we have to tackle the deficit but we do that by growing the economy. We do it by investing in the economy.”

McDonnell closed by thanking Unite and its members, which he said has shown the Corbyn leadership such solidarity “in a time of real struggle. I know you’ll show that solidarity,” he said. “That’s the heart of this union and always has been.”

Support Corbyn call

Uniting behind Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn, Unite delegates voted to call on Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) to urge their MPs to support the party’s democratically elected leader.

The carried motion urged all concerned to re-double their efforts to ensure Jeremy Corbyn is elected as the UK’s next prime minister.

Following a balanced debate the motion was carried by a large majority, confirming Unite’s solid support for a united Labour party under the leadership of Corbyn.

And in a related debate, delegates supported a motion supporting the need for mandatory reselection of Labour MPs in each Parliament. This will mean Labour MPs will be held accountable to their Constituency Labour Party (CLP).
IRELAND

**Investment call**

After years of recession and austerity, the Republic of Ireland is back in growth, but it’s largely been a bosses’ recovery, conference heard.

That’s why delegates backed a plan resisting corporate-backed policies that have depressed living standards in the Republic as well as in Northern Ireland – still in deep recession. Unite called for a programme focused on investment, a revitalised public sector, and a renewed emphasis on manufacturing.

“In our unity there is strength,” said Ireland secretary Jimmy Kelly. “We can deliver a better tomorrow for all the working class on these islands.”

LIVING WAGE

**Across the board**

Unite’s campaign was backed by motions calling for an across-the-board Living Wage – now £9.40 an hour in London and £8.25 an hour in the rest of the UK – as calculated by the independent Living Wage Foundation.

Currently, the government’s re-branded minimum wage – the so-called National Living Wage – only applies to those over 25. Conference also backed ongoing exploration of the idea of Universal Basic Income – an unconditional, non-withdrawable income paid to everyone.

TRANSPORT

**Re-nationalise**

Unite reiterated its commitment to lobbying for full public ownership of rail and bus networks, after delegates overwhelmingly called for the issue to be a key priority for the union.

David Smith, East Midlands believed transport was an issue that was “vitally important” to all members, both for workers who work in transport and those who use transport. And London and Eastern’s Andrew Yeardley said, “Unite is proud to support renationalising of railway and buses.”

NHS

**NHS fight**

The NHS must be defended with greater urgency and delegates carried motions to step up Unite’s campaigns including taking coordinated industrial action, supporting junior doctors, and lobbying the Labour party to support the union’s NHS policies.

North East region’s Lee Gill Singh said defending the NHS requires fighting with a “larger strategy,” “We must fight for a transformation of society.”

FRACKING

**Supporting members**

After a debate on fracking Unite confirmed it will stand by members’ jobs and continue to seek to organise and represent workers engaged in fracking related work. But the union would still maintain its opposition to the impact fracking has on the environment.

Conference backed a proposal calling on Unite to commit to both, ensuring robust health and safety procedures are in place for industry workers and ensuring that minimum standards for pay, terms and conditions are in place as well.

FIND OUT MORE

We’ve outlined just some of the conference highlights here. To find out more members can visit www.uniteconferences.org – you’ll gain access with your member login details.

VIDEO LINKS

Check out our filmed coverage
Len McCluskey’s speech
http://unitelive.org/yes-to-solidarity/
Jeremy Corbyn’s speech
http://unitelive.org/what-makes-us-strong/
John McDonnell’s speech
http://unitelive.org/courage-and-solidarity/
Frances O’Grady’s speech
http://unitelive.org/stick-together-and-win/