

ANNUAL REPORT, FEBRUARY 2006

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

2005 was something of a watershed in British politics. True, New Labour were returned again in the General Election, but this time with a much reduced majority. Tony Blair no longer appeared to be an asset, but is now a liability - a clear consequence of his support for Bush's war on Iraq. The new Westminster arithmetic has brought forward the day when Blair must step down. More importantly, however, it has given opportunities to the labour movement and the Left to lobby for different policies. Indeed it is new policies, rather than a change of face from Blair to Brown (or some other New Labour clone), which are desperately needed.

The chief area for policy change is the situation of Iraq. Despite the so-called elections there, Iraq remains a quagmire, with continued tragic loss of life, mainly of Iraqis but also of the occupation forces. In Britain and the USA, the occupation is becoming increasingly unpopular. However, both the internecine warfare - including suicide bombings - and the election results themselves in fact serve US interests quite well, by weakening chances for unified opposition to the theft of Iraqi oil. Some sections of the Iraqi trade union movement have even called for the occupation to continue until the security improves. While we in Britain have a duty to build solidarity with our Iraqi sisters and brothers, we cannot be expected to compromise on our view that this is an imperialist occupation and that it is part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

After Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction, there is currently a great deal of hype about Iran's processing of nuclear fuel and its possible future ability to build nuclear weapons. All this pontification distracts attention from the massive nuclear arsenals of the imperialist powers and their responsibility to begin disarming under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Britain's Trident-based nuclear weapons system is reaching the end of its life and it looks like Blair has already decided to upgrade it with another £billion US-manufactured system. CND is campaigning for Trident to be scrapped altogether and not be replaced, a demand which Newcastle TUC and many in the labour movement will support.

The "War on Terror" has been the pretext for a continued assault on civil liberties in Britain over the last year. ID cards, detention without trial, a ban on demonstrations near Parliament ... none of these is justified by the security problems Britain faces. The dangers for democracy were graphically illustrated on our own patch by the outrageous arrest and detention of the NO2ID protesters at the EU ministerial conference at Gosforth Park. The labour and peace movements rightly condemned the horrific London tube and bus bombings, but they also pointed out the root cause motivating such attacks - US and British imperialism's long and continued history of trampling on the rights and aspirations of poor people in Palestine, Iraq and the wider world. Political solutions are needed, not more repression.

In the North East of England, 60,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost in the last 8 years. In 2005, Ellington Colliery, LG Philips, Hugh Mackay Carpets (Durham) and O'Donnell Brothers (Lemington) closed, and the North East Co-op announced it was disposing of all of its stores. On the Tyne, McNulty Offshore went into receivership, Amec sold off its Howdon yard and Swan Hunter is now hanging by a thread, having lost out on a major share in the fabrication work of two new aircraft carriers.

The regional employment rate is less than 70%, and nearly 1 in 5 of working age are claiming benefits relating to worklessness. Household spending is 18% less than the UK average, and life expectancy remains among the lowest in the country. The government's election pledge of 80% employment by 2010 has now however become a "long term ambition" and indeed the North East could be sacrificed if an 80% average could be fiddled nationally. Cuts in Jobcentre Plus and the Learning & Skills Council suggest this decision has already been taken.

To meet the 80% target, 100,000 new jobs will be needed in the North East. That can only be achieved with specific government job creation policies, and defence of our manufacturing industry. That will require standing up to the rules of the European Union which bar import controls, nationalisation and state support for industry.

The closure of Ellington was a part of a cynical exercise by British Coal to convert from deep mining to property development and increased opencasting. Meanwhile, as the NUM warned, Britain is becoming a net importer of natural gas, and there is widespread concern over the environmental impacts of proposed opencast mining and wind farm projects. Tony Blair has announced yet another energy review, opening the door to a new tranche of nuclear power stations, on the fallacious grounds of reducing carbon emissions. Regional development agency One North East jumped the gun with inviting bids for a nuclear feasibility study, but public pressure forced them to draw back. What is clear is that big business and the market cannot resolve the energy problems and the associated environmental issues. We need public ownership and democratic planning of the energy industry.

The unnecessary waste of energy is seen most clearly in transport. In the region, roads are becoming increasingly congested as people switch from public transport to cars - a consequence of deteriorating services and higher fares under the privateers. The Department for Transport is now considering savage cuts to northern rail services, and many bus services in Tyne & Wear are under threat, due to the £7.3 million shortfall in government funds for pensioner travel passes.

Step-by-step privatisation continues to stalk our other public services. Hospitals are being forced to buy from the private sector, even when they can provide the service - such as MRI scans - themselves. Newcastle NHS Trust has signed a £300 million PFI deal with privateers to design, build and maintain the Freeman and RVI sites - imposing an extra cost which will have to be picked up by our children and grandchildren. Massive job losses are anticipated in the Newcastle-based Prescription Pricing Authority as the Business Services Agency which runs it has been given the green light to procure services from the private sector. Meanwhile health provision in Newcastle being eroded: Walkergate Hospital, which provides services for the elderly, is set to close; cancer patients in the North East are being denied vital drugs; and it is becoming nigh impossible to find an NHS dentist.

The school repairs backlog in the region is now over £590 million. The only way for local councils to get funding for this is through the Building Schools for the Future programme - but that requires both agreement to establish a privateer-run City Academy, and the setting up of private sector-led consortia to run support services (and perhaps even teaching) at those schools in the BSF programme. In Newcastle the big debate has been over the proposed closure of West Gate Community College in favour of Lord Irvine Laidlaw's City Academy, but the whole principle of comprehensive education is threatened both by the BSF programme and the proposals outlined in the government's latest White Paper on education.

Sharp battles are being fought in many public sector areas. The CWU is fighting hard to defend the Post Office against creeping privatisation. PCS members are set to strike in January 2006 over cuts to civil service jobs, and local government workers seem likely to do the same over threats to their pension scheme. The FBU is campaigning hard against the regionalisation of control centres, which threatens to put lives at risk. Victories can be won: council tenants in North Tyneside and Sedgefield voted to stay with their local authority, and teachers and civil service workers did manage partially to defeat threats to their own pension schemes.

"Privatisation - Time to Reverse" is an idea whose time has come.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Following the lead of the TUC nationally and locally via the programme of work we will need to build the size of the Trades Council with new delegates as the first stage in building wider local campaigns on local issues. Two local campaigns would be the Westgate Community College and its replacement by a City Academy. The second would be the affects on local jobs caused by privatisation in the NHS at the PPA.

During the spring of 2005 there was many discussions about the Centre Against Unemployment and the proposal for the RMT to use part of the building. Initially this was discussed as the RMT renting space in the building, which the extended to an offer to buy the building with space agreed for the centre to continue to function in the building. The offer to buy the building was rejected while we reviewed other options. At the time of writing this report no further progress has taken place on this issue.

At the June 2005 meeting Kenny Bell of Unison reported on the campaign to retain the Westgate Community College and reject the plans for a City Academy. Delegates from the Trades Council attended various meetings, distributed leaflets, and attended rallies outside the Civic Centre. The City Council approved the plans in late July 2005. Further meeting on this issue have been held in December 2005 and there are plans for a further meeting in January 2006, so it may still be possible to change the decision.

More traditional trade union issues were discussed at the September meeting of the Trades Council when the Secretary reported on the sacking of over 600 low paid catering workers at Gate Gourmet, near Heathrow Airport. This had led to an unofficial walkout by ground staff at British Airways who originally owned and ran this catering operation. Subsequently British Airways sacked two TGWU representatives and suspended a third. This highlights the need for improved union rights and the repeal of many of the conservative laws introduced in the eighties and nineties, and so far not repealed by the current labour government.

At the November meeting we had a discussion on civil liberties. This covered a number of issues: ASBOs, limits to demonstrations at Westminster, the proposed introduction of ID cards and the recent anti-terror proposals to hold suspects without trial for up to 90 days.

At the December and January meeting we had long discussions on assistance we can provide to the UNISON members at the PPA, who have concerns over future job prospects, with the proposed merger of a number of NHS groups into the BSA. The BSA main purpose is to commission rather than provide services (leading inexorably to privatisation). This is probably part of the creeping privatisation of those parts of the NHS that many members of the public have little experience of, but may lead to poorer front line services in the future.

Following the 'Organising Unions, Organising Communities' conference held in November 2005, at Congress House, the first stage of our response has to be to build participation in the Trades Council. The larger branches should be encouraged to send more than one delegate and be actively involved in all the trades council business. We should also be looking to get delegates from branches and unions currently under-represented. The merger of unions and branches into larger monoliths should not be the reason for the reduced participation in the Trades Council, but an opportunity for revitalisation and growth in participation.

Many issues should be a reason for revitalisation: the attack on public service jobs (e.g. Civil Service); the attack on pension and sick pay agreed in the public and private sector; the outsourcing and exporting of jobs to lower waged economies that are having a major effect on call centre and related jobs in the city and wider region.

Hopefully these negative issues mentioned earlier do not happen and jobs on Tyneside are more secure. To all those future delegates and branches please affiliate and take an active role in the trades council movement.

JIM SIMPKIN
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

TYNE AND WEAR ASSOCIATION OF TRADES UNION COUNCILS

In 2005 Tyne & Wear CATUC shifted its meetings to 5.30 pm on the first Monday in the month, with discussions focused more towards campaigning. In July Peter O'Brien, Northern TUC Researcher, opened a discussion on the TUC's submission to One North East's Regional Economic Strategy, and he came back in November along with Mary Ferguson of PCS for a public meeting on Worklessness. In October there was an in-depth discussion about the background to the success of North Tyneside's campaign to defend council housing. The CATUC has also been active in promoting the role of trades councils and unemployed centres within the wider trade union movement, predominantly through the Northern Regional TUC and its working group established following the Annual Regional Conference in April.

The TUC Regional Conference itself, held in the run-up to the General Election, adopted a number of positive motions including those on Arms Conversion (from Tyne & Wear CATUC), the Good Friday Peace Process (from Newcastle TUC), Fighting Racism and the BNP (UNISON), Mobilising for G8 (UNISON) and the composites on Manufacturing, Defending Council Housing, Rail Renationalisation and Corporate Manslaughter. An Emergency Motion from this Trades Council on the Prevention of Terrorism Act was also carried. The undersigned was re-elected to the Executive Committee to represent Tyne & Wear CATUC.

All the Conference motions have generated a substantial work programme for the Northern TUC, which is being carried forward in a number of areas - Boosting Union Organisation and Representation, Promoting Equality, Raising the Quality of Working Life, Improving Economic Performance and Influencing Social Policy. The Regional TUC is particularly active on anti-racism, health and safety, union learning, international solidarity and promoting the involvement of young people in trade unions, including the production of effective campaigning materials.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

NEWCASTLE & GATESHEAD TUC CENTRE AGAINST UNEMPLOYMENT

At the beginning of the year the possibility of hiring a room to the RMT turned into a proposal from the RMT to sell them the whole building with one floor being left available to the CAU. This was backed by all but one of the Centre workers and volunteers as there was an expectation that the Newcastle TUC (owners of the building) would then be able to fund partially the Centre workers' wages in the coming years. This was rejected by Newcastle TUC which resulted in some tensions between the Trades Council and the workers.

Whilst the various discussions were taking place regarding the hire/sale of the premises the CAU was again invited to tender for a Learning for All Fund grant. A grant proposal following guidelines laid out by the LfAF was duly submitted. However at some point after the

submission was made the guidelines were changed; the submission was ruled out of order and the CAU failed to get a grant.

This left the CAU with a major funding problem after June 30th when the National Employment Panel work (tackling the lack of learning opportunities for temporary workers) came to an end. The position was assisted somewhat by Newcastle TUC extending indefinitely the time to repay monies recently loaned to cover a cash flow problem and expenses incurred in running the building.

The major financial breakthrough came with the law firm of Browell Smith & Co agreeing to give the CAU a grant to cover the work it was doing in supporting victims of asbestos related diseases. Money however was still tight and in spite of the two workers in the IT for the unemployed project taking a wage cut there was pressure on to end this work completely.

A new regime of enrolling unemployed workers onto the courses however resulted in an increase in fees from Gateshead College and eased the financial problems. Just when this new arrangement was becoming established, financial problems at Gateshead College caused them to end abruptly our contract with them. That resulted in the two IT project workers being declared redundant.

Before the redundancies were due to take place the possibility of a grant (sponsored by the GMB in the region) from the Union Learning Fund arose. This along with the fact that the TUC Learning Centre at Newcastle College was prepared to help us as well resulted in the redundancies being cancelled. At this point in time though nothing has been agreed in writing and many uncertainties hang over the project.

It certainly has been a roller coaster of a year for the CAU (not much change from the usual state of affairs then). The one bright spot is that Browell Smith & Co are continuing their support of the Centres work on behalf of victims of asbestos. The Centre has brought about the formation of an Asbestos Support Group in the area. In conjunction with the Evening Chronicle, it has had a major success in persuading the NHS to make available in the area the drug Alimta to sufferers of mesothelioma. The Centre's welfare rights work continues with an ever-increasing number of clients but sadly efforts to gain grants from local authorities etc. to assist with this work so far have failed.

ALAN LUBBOCK
(Amicus Durham North)

TRADES UNION STUDIES INFORMATION UNIT/ASBESTOS VICTIMS SUPPORT GROUP

Since local government financial support for TUSIU ended in the 2001/2002 financial year TUSIU was relatively dormant. This year has seen the continuing revival, as part the workload of the Centre Against Unemployment.

With funds and resources from solicitors dealing with health and safety issues in the workplace (Browell-Smith) and further funds from unions in the region this has allowed the continuation of work by the project worker John Kelly, with the support of the centre co-ordinator Kevin Flynn.

The Tyne and Wear Asbestos Support Group was re-launched, in July 2005 at the Northern TUC with a number of speakers including the local Labour MP Nick Brown and various regional trade unionists.

Since the re-launch, work has been progressing to build up the profile of the group, via local press reports on asbestos related issues. There have also been a number of public meetings across the county leading to more contacts with sufferers, carer's and other people affected by the illnesses caused by exposure to asbestos in the workplace.

Funding, as in previous years, is the main problem in building this campaign to a sustainable medium term future. The problems caused by exposure to asbestos will not go away and deaths caused by asbestos will continue to increase in the coming years. The medium term future of the project is therefore important and a sufficient predictable income should be a target for the coming year.

JIM SIMPKIN
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

TYNE & WEAR MAY DAY COMMITTEE

The 2005 May Day March & Rally took place just before the General Election, on Saturday April 30. Speakers included: Jim Cousins MP; Kath Sainsbury from the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns; Kenny Bell, UNISON Deputy Regional Convenor; and Jon Bryan, NATFHE NEC member and Newcastle College Branch Secretary. Janice Godrich, PCS President was due to speak, but unfortunately was indisposed. On the other hand, we were pleased to have a spirited contribution from the young activists campaigning against redevelopment of Eldon Square. Advertising revenue in the professionally designed brochure again helped to ensure financial security. Ed Whitby, the Committee Secretary, recently stood down but fortunately the Committee has been strengthened by new members, and preparations are already well advanced for the 2006 event on Saturday 29 April, at which the TUC's campaign for a Trade Union Freedom Bill will feature prominently.

Like Newcastle TUC, the Committee was shocked and deeply distressed at the tragic loss of Joe Scurfield. Joe was Secretary of the Committee in the late 1980s and particularly for the 1990 Centenary May Day. A testimonial to his work will be published in the 2006 brochure.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

CHRISTMAS DANCE FOR PEACE AND SOLIDARITY

The 20th Annual Christmas Dance for Peace and Solidarity was a stunning success, in the biggest venue since the early years in the Guildhall and sold out almost a week in advance. A cause for celebration? Not really. But satisfaction, yes, because the 2005 Dance gave so many the opportunity to pay tribute to two of Tyneside's finest - Joe Scurfield and Keith Morris, tragically killed in that notorious hit-and-run incident in June last year.

It had been difficult for the Committee to pick up the pieces. Both Keith and Joe had been involved in the Dance in its earliest years, through various bands but in Joe's case also as an organiser and mobiliser. After the 3 barren years in the 90s when the Dance for Peace & Socialism did not happen, it was Joe who helped the Trades Council to revive it in its broader appeal of Peace & Solidarity. Given Joe's busy working life, others had to pick up various roles, but Joe was essential as Secretary, press agent and general fount of knowledge about organising such events and getting many people to play a part.

There was an enormous fund of good will towards making the 2005 Dance a real tribute to Joe and Keith. Joe's place on the Committee was immediately and most ably taken over by

his Old Rope String Band comrade Pete Challoner. Kathryn Tickell and her band, rapper sword dance side the Newcastle Kingsmen and the Yorkshire Cajun combo of Joe's brother Harry, Bayou Gumbo, all willingly agreed to perform. Keith's band Red Music reformed after 20 years, and did an amazing set as a tribute to his memory. At the upstairs stage we had children's entertainment and up-and-coming Tyneside band Loon. The main stage also saw the first performance of the New Rope String Band, worthy successors to the Old Ropes. But most important, it was a tremendous if poignant event for the many punters.

As Joe and Pete's comrade Tim Dalling said on the night, it was time to move on. But moving on must also mean moving up - learning from the past, building on the best of it and aiming to do better in future. The Xmas Dances were intended to provide an alternative to the mass-produced seasonal celebrations, enabling activists on the left to let their hair down and have a really good time in a convivial atmosphere. The Dances will continue, moving on and up.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

NEWCASTLE LAW CENTRE

The Law Centre has expanded over this year. It now has five caseworkers, an administration worker, a cashier and two legal secretaries.

There is an increasing demand from major client groups for much needed legal advice and support. Over 50% of current clients (both face to face and telephone enquiries) are local residents who are from black or minority ethnic groups including refugees or asylum seekers. This year it has been identified that 44% of the clients have some kind of disability including a number with mental health issues and learning disabilities.

The Centre has seen a significant increase in the take up of advice sessions. For example in the last year, in addition to specialist casework, 1361 one-off enquiries were answered, a 50% increase on the year before.

In September 2004 the Law Centre became a charity. This has meant that over the last year it has been able to look at putting in further funding bids. Funds have been received from Sir James Knott Trust, Hadrian Trust and the Sherburn Trust for office furniture. The Law Centre has also been successful in a funding bid to Lloyds TSB Foundation over two years. This is for core funding so is very welcome. A large application has also been submitted to Northern Rock for a grant over 3 years. The Centre is waiting to hear about this.

Future developments of the work of the Law Centre are largely dependent on funding. In September 2005 a bid was submitted to fund a disability rights worker. This was successful and recruitment will start shortly. In November 2005 the Law Centre also put a bid in to the Commission for Racial Equality for a worker. The decision is awaited.

The lift at Charlotte Square is now completed so there is hope that the Law Centre will get disabled access to the first floor offices but there are still difficulties with access to the lift and the cobbled streets around the building. The Centre is liaising with the Council to try and resolve these issues.

SEAN McDONNELL
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

STOP THE WAR COALITION

The Tyneside Stop the War Coalition has continued to campaign against the occupation of Iraq. A stall has been maintained at the Monument almost every Saturday. Public meetings were organised, addressed by Bruce Kent, Paddy Cosgrove QC and David Shayler. A local demonstration was organised on February 12, with a rally at the Quayside, in conjunction with Labour's Spring Conference at The Sage Gateshead. Buses were sent to support national Stop the War Coalition demonstrations in London on March 19 and September 24. the next big event is the national demonstration on March 18 2006, coinciding with the anniversary of the launch of the war on Iraq.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

PEOPLE'S PRESS PRINTING SOCIETY

2005 was the 75th anniversary year of the *Morning Star*, which is published by the People's Press Printing Society. A number of events were organised around the country, including the first Northern Regional Conference, *Which Policies for a Real Labour Government?*, at Gateshead Civic Centre on February 19. Speakers included: *Morning Star* Editor John Haylett; NUM Chairman Ian Lavery; Mary Davis, Chair of NATFHE's Women's Committee; Labour prospective Parliamentary candidate Dave Anderson; Helen John from the Menwith Hill Women's Peace Camp; and Mick Rix, Chair of the PPPS Management Committee and also Chair of the Labour Representation Committee.

Following the success of this event, a second Regional Conference, *Privatisation: Time to Reverse* was held on November 5, again at Gateshead Civic Centre. Speakers were more local on this occasion, including Paul Clays (CWU), Mary Ferguson (PCS), Stan Herschel (RMT), Kevin Flynn (North Tyneside Defend Council Housing Campaign), Arthur Smelt (Campaign Against Euro-Federalism) and Kenny Bell (UNISON). Nonetheless, attendance was well up on the excellent February turn-out. A third conference is already being planned, hopefully for May 2006.

Newcastle TUC has again submitted greetings adverts to the *Morning Star*, for the TUC and Labour Party Conferences, but in 2005 also for the 90th Birthday of Brother Dave Atkinson (who in his own advert specifically thanked the Trades Council for support and comradeship). Tragically, we also had to place an 'In Memoriam' notice for Brother Joe Scurfield.

The severe distribution problems faced by the *Morning Star* in 2004 continued throughout most of 2005, an ongoing consequence of the concentration of wholesaler depots and the early cut-off time for arrival of papers there. This has made building daily sales quite difficult. Nonetheless, the Durham NUM again paid for 2000 free copies of the paper to be distributed at the Gala in July, and a daily circulation drive in the North East started in January 2006.

The annual Tyneside *Morning Star* Bazaar on November 19 raised £470 for the paper, and 2005 ended on a positive note for the PPPS, with both the £16000 monthly Fighting Fund and the special £75000 Anniversary Appeal reaching their target.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)