

ANNUAL REPORT, FEBRUARY 2007

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

2006 was the year when Tony Blair was finally forced to concede that his days as Prime Minister were numbered. His refusal to act against Israel's invasion of Lebanon and the punitive occupation of Palestine crystallised the mood of public revulsion against his hypocrisy and his policies in general, which finally got through to Labour MPs. The mass anti-war movement in Britain, and the morass which the Afghanistan and Iraq occupations have become, have helped to swing public opinion decisively against Blair and his policies.

The Iraq war has also clipped the wings of Blair's puppet master, George Bush. His popularity in the USA is at an all-time low, and his party has lost control of both Houses of Congress. Yet Bush's approach remains imperialist and dangerously aggressive. Ignoring the recommendations of his own Iraq Study Group for a more political solution, to extricate the USA, Bush is pressing ahead with sending 25,000 more troops to Iraq, and threatening Iran for allegedly interfering in Iraq and Lebanon and having the temerity to run its own uranium enrichment programme. A US or Israeli missile strike against Iran is clearly on Bush's agenda.

Blair likewise is continuing to press backwards, with imperialist, pro-big business 'New Labour' policies, on Iraq, Trident replacement, public services, pensions, the environment, civil liberties, democracy and the 'free' movement of capital and labour.

Despite nearly 10 years of Blair's government, the North East of England remains in many ways as poor and deprived as ever. Manufacturing in the North East has continued to haemorrhage under the impact of the global market - championed by 'New Labour' - and the free movement of capital. Shipbuilding on Tyneside is no more, now that Swan Hunter has effectively been closed by the Government. Call centre workers at Zurich Insurance (Newcastle) and other companies are also losing their jobs, many of which are being outsourced as far away as India.

While regional employment is up - at 1.16 million - the employment rate remains low, at only 71%, and well short of the government's own target of 80% by 2010. The actual employment figure has been boosted by the 40,000 Eastern Europeans who have registered for work in the North East since EU expansion in 2004. The overwhelming majority work in construction - meeting the skills gap -, agriculture, food processing, hospitality, cleaning and care, generally low-paid jobs.

There is an expectation that workers will simply travel to where jobs are. This so-called 'free movement of labour' actually means lower wages in practice. Furthermore, above-inflation fare rises, and the lack of adequate services, are forcing people off public transport into their own cars, thereby increasing the CO₂ emissions which are contributing to global warming, quite apart from gridlocking our main roads. What is urgently needed is an industrial strategy which sites jobs and services near to the people who use them and focuses around public transport nodes. And public transport needs to be publicly owned, adequately subsidised and democratically controlled - not the con of giving councils the right to award bus contracts to single monopoly operators, nor the proposed franchising of Tyne & Wear Metro as the price of the needed refurbishment.

Nuclear power, which the government is now promoting, is far from carbon neutral, when power station construction and decommissioning, and nuclear fuel processing are taken into account. The government has now made it much harder to object to the siting of new nuclear power plants. Given that there are existing plants at Hartlepool, Sellafield and Torness, the chances are that those locations will be favoured for new stations.

The National Union of Mineworkers has made the case for a carbon abatement strategy based on continued use of British deep-mined coal. New, more efficient, coal-fired power stations, with clean technology and carbon sequestration and storage, can operate with much reduced carbon dioxide emissions. Centrica is building the first such British plant on Teesside but meanwhile UK Coal is selling off land, and coal is being imported into Blyth instead of mined at Ellington.

Tackling climate change offers major opportunities for British manufacturing industry, whether in coal mining, power engineering or new technology for renewable energy. But this will not happen as long as everything is left to private ownership and the market – or else, working class people will end up paying, as has happened with the increased gas and electricity prices over the past year.

Market mechanisms in public services have been a disaster. The new 'payment by results' system in the NHS means that 7 primary care trusts in the region expect to make a £17.4 million loss in 2006/7. Some already had major 2005/6 deficits. Hospitals in the region have been told to slash the number of operations, see fewer people as outpatients and reduce patient time in hospital. Massive job losses are in the pipeline.

After City Academies and 'Building Schools for the Future' – involving private-led consortia - the 2006 Education and Inspections Act takes privatisation of schools a major step further. The Act is based around establishing Trust schools, freed from local authorities and able to decide their own partners. Already Monkseaton High School in North Tyneside is teaming up with Microsoft to become one of the first 3 such schools in the region. North Tyneside Council in fact is considering that all schools should adopt trust status within 4 clusters and the local authority itself should become a trust. Essentially, every school will become a business. What's more, North Tyneside Council is subjecting most other services to 'market testing' – a first step to contracting them out. Northumberland County Council is also looking to privatise many services.

In further and higher education, the privatised future is already here. Newcastle College broke off merger talks with Gateshead College, only to go for a link-up with other FE colleges in Skelmersdale and Keighley. Northumbria University tried to privatise its English Language Centre and Newcastle is about to do the same. Meanwhile, changes in government funding priorities for adult education mean that classes for disabled people have been cut, and courses in English for Speakers of Other Language are under threat.

Against this background of relentless assaults on the working class locally, regionally and nationally, 2006 did see a notable uplift in the class struggle, mostly in public services. In January 2006 10,000 PCS members at Jobcentres, benefit offices and the Child Support Agency walked out for two days over job cut threats. As we go to press there has just been a further national one-day stoppage. In March, 150,000 public sector workers struck to protect the Local Government Pension Scheme. There were further PCS strikes, in June by Longbenton security guards over pay, and in July at Revenue & Customs over working practices. RMT members held a series of one-day strikes in a pay dispute with Virgin Rail, TSSA balloted for action after GNER announced a staffing review, and bus drivers at Arriva and Stagecoach walked out over pay. Hospital cleaners at South Tyneside held 3 one-day strikes and a week-long strike over pay, and UNISON balloted its members at the Prescription Pricing Authority over privatisation and threatened job losses.

In education, NUT members at Heaton Manor School struck several times over changes in pay, lecturers at Gateshead and Northumberland Colleges walked out over job cuts, and higher education saw its longest ever pay dispute, involving one day-strikes and assessment bans by members of NATFHE and AUT. At Northumbria University lecturers mounted a further strike and tightened action to prevent redundancies, and matters came to a head when the University stopped the pay of 24 union members and the union responded with a threat of all-out, indefinite strike action.

There is widespread disaffection with New Labour policies and relief that Blair is going but many illusions that a Brown-led government will somehow be different. In fact Gordon Brown is one of the architects of New Labour and has backed Blair's policies all the way. If he replaces Blair, it will be more of the same policies and 'don't rock the boat'. and then disaster at the next General Election.

There is an alternative and the labour movement needs to be won to adopt it. Within the Labour Party, John McDonnell's campaign is articulating a set of policies which are in line with those of many major trade unions, and pressure needs to be put on MPs to ensure that John gets the necessary number of signatures to ensure that he is on the ballot paper. His programme provides the basis for building left unity and mass action for a change of course.

Old barriers in the trade union movement are breaking down. University and college lecturers in NATFHE and AUT sunk their differences in 2006 to form a single union, UCU. Amicus and the TGWU have taken the historic decision to merge into a big single union which will represent workers across manufacturing and services. The development of industrial rather than craft trade unionism has the potential to give workers a much stronger bargaining power with employers. But structures themselves will not be enough. Merged unions will only succeed if they have a vision which links militancy, solidarity and the vision of a different form of society. And a start will need to be made, by getting the Trade Union Freedom Bill on the statute book.

MARTIN LEVY
(UCU 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 TUC. With new delegates we can build wider local campaigns on local issues. Like last year, our continuing concerns, has to be public services. Privatisation of one form or another is continuing to advance in health, education, local and national government organisations. As trade unionists we should be concerned, as organisational changes often mask attacks on pay and conditions of our members. This will also impact on the organisations ability to provide the best services for the wider community.

The year started with a couple of visitor's from the NUT, to report their problems relating to the implementation of a new pay structure at one local school. The impact was to reduce the pay of some members by several thousand pounds per year. Following industrial action and further negotiations the impact of the changes was reduced and a settlement of the problems was agreed during the following few weeks.

A number of delegates attended the TUC Greening the workplace conference during the spring of 2006, and a report on the conference was given at the May meeting. Following this in the autumn of 2006 at the request of the Tyneside Engineering branch of Amicus, the Trades Council and Tyne and Wear CATUC organised a conference on energy. This included trade union speakers from the nuclear and coal lobby, and a member of Greenpeace on the environmental impact. The conference was concluded with a speaker on the wider political issues.

At the June meeting Ian Fitzgerald of the Sustainable Cities Research Institute at Northumbria University gave an update to the report "Organising Migrant Workers in Construction" prepared earlier in the year for the Northern TUC.

At the November meeting Roger Cox from the local Palestine Solidarity Campaign gave a report on an earlier visit to Palestine, before he moved to Tyneside. Early in 2006 Roger was planning to visit Palestine during the summer of 2006. This trip was postponed due to the situation in Gaza and Lebanon

During the year we have seen further attacks on good Trade Union Activists across the country. Some have been suspended, others blacklisted and some sacked. As mentioned, in last years report the Gate Gourmet dispute in the summer of 2005 when over 600 low paid catering workers were sacked highlight's 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.

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 (i.e. Civil Service). The attack on pension and sick pay agreed over many years and under attack in the public and private sector, and the outsourcing and exporting of jobs to lower waged economies that are having a major affect on jobs in the city and wider region.

To all those future delegates and branches please affiliate and take an active roll in the trade's council movement.

JIM SIMPKIN
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF TRADES UNION COUNCILS

The 2006 Conference was held in Torquay, Devon on the weekend of the 3rd/4th June. The usual rally was held on the Friday evening before the conference with a number of speakers on the Trade Union Freedom Bill including Jeremy Dear (NUJ General Secretary) Shirley Winter (Northern TUC JCC Rep) and Alec McFadden (North West TUC JCC Rep).

The Conference began on the Saturday morning with the usual collection of motion and as in recent years a number of workshops so as to allow a wider participation in the discussions.

The motions included:

- Pregnancy related absence,
- Sickness absence policies,
- Trade Union Freedom Bill,
- Living wage campaign,
- Benefits,
- *The demise of UK manufacturing (not debated),*
- Use of consultants by public service employers,
- Public services,
- NHS,
- *The health threat to peoples homes (not debated),* (
- Democratising the NHS,
- Marketisation of health and staff co-ops,

- Further education and LSCS,
- Campaign for democratic trade union rights in Saudi Arabia,
- Latin America and Cuba,
- Migrant labour,
- Visitor tickets to TUC Congress,
- Organisation of conference,
- Reporting back.

There was a good debate on most of these motions and most were passed unanimously, however a small number were not debated as the original mover's were not present for one reason or another. There were also two emergency motions one related to job cuts in the NHS and the second related to an attack on Alec McFadden a few weeks before the Conference. The resolutions and General council comments on each are now available.

There were about 100 delegates at the conference from trades' councils, County Associations, JCC and the TUC General Council.

Each workshop session debated a section of the work programme with the normal report back to a full plenary session.

The number of external speakers was down on the previous year's conference probably due to the location, but one major issue was reported on by local TUC members.

As in a number of recent TUC report the issue related to migrant workers. In this instance a meat processing company was employing, probably indirectly, a number of skilled butchers from Eastern Europe at about 2/3rd of the usual rate and housing them in the back of an unheated van at the back of the premises. This was just one of a number of similar cases reported in the south west region during the last year.

Another report relating to trade union rights at work was presented as part of the motion on Saudi Arabia. Our friend in Swansea trades council reported the case of Yahya Al-Faifi who attempted to organise a meeting when the pay and conditions of local employees was under attack. In Saudi Arabia there are no independent trade unions, no collective bargaining rights, no minimum wage and a government which regards any form of industrial action as illegal. Yahya finally fled Saudi Arabia and is now seeking asylum in the UK. You may think these practises discriminatory when other ex-pat workers (from UK, Australia, South Africa, etc.) in Saudi Arabia have the usual rights, terms and conditions. However, this is of deeper concern when the company in question was not a Saudi Arabian company but a UK company, British Aerospace.

There were also a small number of fringe meetings during lunch or at the end of conference on a number of issues.

JIM SIMPKIN
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

TYNE & WEAR MAY DAY COMMITTEE

The 2006 May Day had the usual mix of speakers and topics. They include Billy Hayes (CWU General Secretary), Janice Goodrich (PCS President), Kate Hudson (CND National Chair), Doug Jewell (Liberty Campaign Director) and Kevin Rowan (Northern TUC Secretary). There was also a guest spot by singer Billy Bragg who was appearing at the Sage, Gateshead, on the same evening as part of his 'Hope Not Hate' Tour. Other music on the march and at the rally was provided by Broughton's Brass Band, The Stumbling Band, Ant Orchestra, The 27 Club and Loon. New banners were produced this year, and the

proceeds yielded a small surplus which may be invested in a new front banner for future May Days.

The 2007 event will be held on Saturday 5th May, hopefully with the usual march and rally. Speakers include Paul Kenny, GMB General Secretary, and John McDonnell MP. The timings may be adjusted from previous years to allow for the impact of football/policing demands. Due to increased bureaucracy the 2007 event will require more planning and more support on the day and further volunteers would be most welcome.

JIM SIMPKIN
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

NEWCASTLE LAW CENTRE

The Law Centre has continued to expand during 2006. A Disability Rights worker has been recruited and a successful bid to the Commission for Racial Equality has enabled us to employ an Immigration lawyer. She has recently passed her Immigration Supervisor exams, so can now apply for Supervisor status.

A part-time Coordinator/Fundraiser has also been appointed, who has been given the task of seeking new sources of funding, as some of our existing sources are not entirely sustainable.

There have positive developments among existing staff, with two members becoming solicitors and our senior solicitor becoming a Peer Reviewer of Housing Lawyers.

The Law Centre now coordinates the Newcastle Court Housing Duty Solicitor scheme which expanded this year with 11 agencies and private practice firms now taking part. In the first eight months of the 2006 financial year, the scheme assisted 79 tenants and owner occupiers at court.

The high level of advice sessions taken up last year has been maintained with 1200 new enquiries answered. In addition 682 specialist cases were handled.

A new funding bid has been made to the Northern Rock Foundation, which, if successful will go towards establishing a Newcastle Advice network that will maximize the effectiveness of the smaller independent advice agencies in the voluntary sector. Other sources of funding being pursued include bids to Draper's, Garfield Weston Foundation, Gregg's Trust and the Knott trust.

The main purpose of these funding bids is to enable the Law Centre to work in partnership with other agencies in a more coordinated way. The changing legal climate, with fixed fees set to be introduced in October 2007, will create difficulties for Law centres and others who contract with the Legal Services Commission in the not-for-profit sector. The Trade Union truism "Unity is Strength" will have to become practice if some agencies are to survive.

The Law Centre has secured funding from the Law Centres' Federation to deliver a series of free training sessions on Employment Anti-Discrimination law in January and February 2007. The sessions are to mark Equality Through Justice Week with the first preceding our AGM on 22nd January, and the second, as a Public Forum, immediately following the AGM at 6.30 pm.

SEAN McDONNELL
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

PEOPLE'S PRESS PRINTING SOCIETY

Distribution problems continue to be a major concern of the PPPS, the co-operative which publishes the *Morning Star*. It is remarkable that in this day and age, in a small country such as ours, it is impossible for a paper printed in London to be on sale in Scotland on the day of publication. Yet that has been the situation for some 18 months, since the Royal Mail cancelled the contract to carry the paper, allegedly because of lack of space on the plane from Stansted. The Royal Mail claims it has to make decisions on commercial grounds, yet it still gets privileges as a public service, being the only carrier allowed to fly into Edinburgh at night. Public service ought to extend to ensuring a genuinely free press, distributed throughout Britain. Tyneside does not have quite the same problems as Scotland, but its position as the northernmost distribution point in England, together with the reduction of wholesaler depots (and hence earlier cut-off time for arrival of supplies), means that the paper frequently still does not get displayed on the day of publication.

The PPPS will face further problems in 2007 as the *Morning Star's* printers are relocating, on account of redevelopment for the London Olympics. New software and hardware will have to be bought, to enable the various pages to be sent down the wire and to check that they are printing properly. A major staff retraining exercise will be required. All of this will cost £10,000s, hence it is essential as a first step that the monthly Fighting Fund target of £16,000 is reached every time.

Following the two *Morning Star* Northern Regional Conferences in 2005, a third, on *Globalisation – An Irresistible Force?*, was held at Gateshead Civic Centre on Saturday 28 October 2006. Speakers included NUM North East Area President Dave Guy, Dyal Bagri from the Indian Workers' Association GB, André Wilkinson from Trade Unions Against the EU Constitution, China expert Dr Jenny Clegg, CPUSA Vice-Chair Jarvis Tyner and Dr David Golding from the Jubilee Debt Campaign and Make Poverty History NE.

As before, the Durham NUM paid for 2000 copies of the *Morning Star* to be distributed free at the annual gala, and also for a copy for every delegate to the Northern Region TUC Annual Conference. The 2006 Tyneside *Morning Star* Bazaar, on 9 December, was the best yet, raising £750 for the paper. Newcastle TUC has continued to place greetings adverts in the paper on the occasions of May Day and the annual conferences of the Labour Party, the TUC and the Northern Region TUC.

Articles in the *Morning Star* have highlighted the decision of the Czech government to ban the Communist Youth League, KSM, on the grounds that it "advocates replacing private ownership of the means of production with public ownership". Newcastle TUC has protested vehemently to the Czech ambassador about this step, pointing out that "as British trades unionists who oppose privatisation and who campaign for extension of public ownership, we cannot accept that such activity by the KSM should be made unlawful." An Early Day Motion on this (No. 439) has been put down in Parliament, but needs more MP signatures.

MARTIN LEVY
(UCU Northumbria University)

TYNE & WEAR ANTI-FASCIST ASSOCIATION

It has been a frustrating year for the North East BNP. Although national and international events conspired to give the BNP their most successful local election campaign yet, their North East results were conspicuously poorer than most other regions and the party still has

no councillors in the region. Even so, high vote shares in the West End of Newcastle, in particular, have emboldened them for the future.

Tyneside BNP in particular has displayed a new level of energy and organisation, since the recruitment of Ken Booth, formerly National Front North East organiser, late in 2005. Booth was taken on as "Tyneside Secretary", but has now taken over from Kevin Scott as Regional Organiser. Scott continues, for now at least, as an activist, is still on the National Advisory Council and is the Director Civil Liberty, a fundraising front organisation enabling the BNP to receive donations from abroad.

In October, a by-election campaign in Dunston and Teams ward, Gateshead, signalled a new approach by the BNP. This was the first time we have seen a BNP campaign in the North East organised around a real community issue (the closure of a school), with a credible ward-based candidate, Andy Swaddle. The BNP's campaign, on the surface at least, had no element of racism, Islamophobia or anti-immigrant propaganda – something which, if it becomes the norm, has serious implications for anti-fascist campaigning. Although the end result fell slightly short of the 2nd place the BNP had hoped for, it gives them a sound basis to build on in the ward next May.

A by-election the following month in Lemington, Newcastle, saw Booth revert to type, targeting the core racist voters who supported the NF in the ward in 2003/04. A third place result was no surprise in a ward that the Conservatives did not contest in May.

Elsewhere, a newly formed Sedgefield BNP group showed signs of life, but the Darlington branch fared less well. Organiser Trevor Agnew, continuing his quest to spend time in every fascist party in Britain, transferred his loyalties to England First, a party with two councillors in Blackburn but little organisation outside Lancashire. Agnew has reportedly taken other members with him, so if the BNP does manage to rebuild its Darlington branch, it will face competition for the fascist vote in the town.

Unrest in the party about leader Griffin's cavalier attitude to financial management has also led other activists to withdraw their support – including North Tyneside Organiser Chris Wallace, who is now aligned with the New Nationalist Party, a tiny group formed by disgruntled BNPer. Former Sunderland Organiser John Martin, who left the party publicly and bitterly after the BNP's 2003 non-breakthrough, is now leading the North East division of the November 9th society, an openly neo-Nazi sect which would be laughable if not for its members tendency towards racist violence.

Whilst these splinter groups may split the nationalist vote in some areas and contribute to the many feuds and divisions of the far right, ultimately they are highly unlikely to pose a serious threat to the BNP's position as the UK's top fascists.

The BNP's intention to stand greater numbers of candidates than ever before is clear and their results are likely to improve in many areas where they have now had a presence for some years. Encouraging election results in Gateshead and Newcastle, coupled with the continued stagnation of the Sunderland branch, make it clear that Tyneside will be the focal point for the BNP in the 2007 local elections.

TWAFWA DELEGATE

CHRISTMAS DANCE FOR PEACE AND SOLIDARITY

The 21st Annual Christmas Dance for Peace & Solidarity took place at the Blackfriars Centre, New Bridge St, on Tuesday December 19. Performers were the Wolfgang String Quartet, the Old Contemptibles Ceilidh Band, Caravan, the Smokin' Sisters, the Newcastle Kingsmen

and the Baghdaddies. Again it was a sell-out event. A total of £1350 was raised, and was split evenly between the three beneficiaries: the Newcastle East Area Asylum Seekers' Support Group, Medical Aid for Palestinians and CND's 'Stop Trident' campaign.

MARTIN LEVY
(UCU Northumbria University)

TYNE AND WEAR COUNTY ASSOCIATION OF TRADES UNION COUNCILS

The CATUC has continued to act as a useful coordinating forum for trades councils in Tyne & Wear, not least for motions to the Northern Regional TUC Annual Conference and for the Annual Conference of Trades Union Councils. In particular, it has played a leading role in highlighting with the regional trade unions the need to give support to, and to revitalise, trades councils and TUC centres against unemployment. It has also helped build the Tyneside Trade Union Community Consortium, linking trades councils, trade unions, the Centre Against Unemployment, the Asbestos Victims' Support Group, Wallsend People's Centre and the Newcastle Law Centre around the theme of 'Trade Unionism in the Community'.

Open meetings on topical issues continue to feature on the CATUC's calendar. At the September meeting Michael Bone from civil service union Prospect gave a sharp critique of "Workplace Health Connect" as a backdoor privatisation in the Health & Safety Executive. In December Regional TUC Secretary Kevin Rowan talked about the TUC's "Family Friendly" policies. The February 2007 meeting is due to focus on "Opportunity and Security Throughout Life".

At the request of Newcastle TUC, the CATUC sponsored a half-day symposium at Gateshead Civic Centre on 7 October, on the theme of "Energy in the Balance?" Speakers were Ian Lavery (NUM Chair), Dougie Rooney (Amicus National Officer for Energy), John Everett (Greenpeace) and the undersigned. About 30 were present, and it was a good debate.

MARTIN LEVY
(UCU Northumbria University)

NORTHERN REGIONAL TRADES UNION CONGRESS

The undersigned is one of the Tyne & Wear CATUC delegates to the Annual Conference and Council Meetings of the Regional TUC, and represents the CATUC on the Regional TUC's Executive Committee. The Annual Regional Conference has become a significant event, with trade unions now contributing many more motions, although most are moved and agreed without dissenting voices. The Executive Committee also works well, and has helped coordinate activities around pensions, the NHS crisis, local government, civil service cuts etc. The Regional TUC has been very prominent in the NHS Together campaign and in the campaign to defend public services generally, ensuring that there were good delegations to the lobbies of Parliament. The Regional launch of NHS Together at the Centre for Life in November attracted around 150 people. The International Forum has hosted a number of visitors, including notably veteran US peace and anti-racist activist Jarvis Tyner, who spoke at the Regional TUC's first Black History Month event in October.

The one problem with the Regional TUC is the Council meetings, where attendance has fallen. A working party has suggested moving these to a week-night or day-time slot during the working week, but the CATUC has criticised this as tending to exclude lay delegates who cannot get time off or cannot easily travel long distances to an evening meeting. A different approach, tried out at the January 2007 meeting, is to have a relatively short Regional Council followed by an open seminar. This seemed to work quite well except that, in the view of this delegate, the topic of the meeting – the European Social Model – allowed speakers to promote a strongly pro-EU and pro-EU Constitution position.

MARTIN LEVY
(UCU Northumbria University)

NEWCASTLE & GATESHEAD TUC CENTRE AGAINST UNEMPLOYMENT

In last years report it was mentioned that there was a possibility of a grant, for running the IT courses for unemployed workers, from the Union Learning Fund sponsored by the GMB. This did indeed happen but the grant unfortunately was no where near the amount we at first hoped for. It was also mentioned that the TUC Learning Centre at Newcastle College would possibly be prepared to take over course moderation after Gateshead College withdrew. This too came to pass. The courses were therefore able to continue through 2006; however not without a major hiccup, when Newcastle College considered pulling the plug at one stage.

Although at the time of writing things are not yet finally confirmed we are looking forward to being able to continue with the courses in 2007. In addition to the IT courses the CAU was approached in 2006 by Advice^{UK} to run three events on the recently passed Age Discrimination Legislation. This we readily accepted and they are about to take place.

The welfare rights work of the CAU continues with on average two new cases per week to deal with. These cover workers grievance procedures, disciplinary cases, appeals, unfair dismissals and employment tribunals. A good proportion of these cases we win for our clients; the most successful being a £30,000 award for unfair dismissal due to racial discrimination.

Browell Smith solicitors continue to support us with a quarterly grant of £5,000 to carry on this work along with the work we put into the Asbestos Support Group. The asbestos work is not running as smoothly as we would wish. Although we had a very upbeat AGM with Nick Brown MP addressing the delegates there are still organisational problems to sort out with membership of the national Asbestos Forum our first objective. We were also unable to continue funding a full time development worker and the project is currently run by voluntary workers and along with the centre co-ordinator. On top of which the body that decides the availability of drugs on the NHS(NICE) has decided against the drug Alimita for victims of mesothelioma hence reversing all the good campaigning work we were involved in 2006.

The CAU was recently rung up by a reporter from the Chronicle to remind us that it was 35 years since the unemployment benefit claimants figure rose above 1 million. There were lots of protests then but there is more than 1m on the dole now and there is hardly a whimper of protest. We need to give some serious thought to this.

ALAN LUBBOCK
(Amicus Durham North)