

ANNUAL REPORT, FEBRUARY 2005

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Meeting as we do in the wake of the disastrous earthquake and tsunami in South East Asia, we should salute to the massive humanitarian response in Britain and throughout the world. This outpouring of solidarity gives the lie to right-wing ideas about human nature.

The size of the reconstruction task is enormous, but the response from bodies who can afford to help pay for it falls scandalously short. Vodafone donated one hour's worth of its annual profits, BP what it makes in an hour and a half. The contributions of the British and US governments are a pittance compared with what they are wasting in war on Iraq.

Gordon Brown's proposal of a 12-month debt moratorium is a con. India, Sri Lanka and Thailand may get relief of their combined £22 billion payments in the current year, but their £300 billion debt remains, and they will still have to service it in the long run.

Shocked as we are by the terrible loss of life in this disaster, we should not lose sight of the fact that preventable disasters of deaths from illness and starvation hit the Third World year-round. This points to the need for a different world order. Developing countries don't need Brown's "Marshall aid" plan - they need fair terms of trade, an end to the ruthless plundering of their natural resources and cancellation of all Third World debt.

The war in Iraq has remained at the forefront over the last year, despite efforts by Tony Blair and other government ministers to "draw a line" and "move on." The killings of Iraqis and occupation forces, the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Camp Bread Basket, the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq - all of these have an uncanny knack of forcing their way into the media. The war is becoming a quagmire and the issue is not going to go away. Despite the whitewash of the Hutton Report, it is clear that Blair lied to the House of Commons. He is in thrall to the Bush administration and will drag Britain into more and more wars unless prevented by the labour movement.

The re-election of George Bush, paid for by the most right-wing sections of American big business, is a set-back for world peace but not a cause for defeatism. Bush did not gain a landslide and will face domestic struggles from the coalition of labour, women, peace activists, national minorities and the economically dispossessed which was mobilised against him. For us in Britain, it is essential to build solidarity with those peoples who are in the Bush administration's sights, whatever we might think of their countries' internal politics - Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran and North Korea. We must also redouble efforts to end British collaboration with the US's so-called National Missile Defence System, which in fact is about world domination.

We are now in the run-up to a General Election in Britain, expected by most pundits to be held in May this year. Despite the opinion polls, there remains widespread disillusionment among Labour supporters, a factor which must have contributed to the LibDems' victory in the 2004 Newcastle City Council elections, and the loss of the referendum on the establishment of a North East Regional Assembly. Newcastle TUC was sceptical of the benefits of the proposed Assembly, a position out of line with the most of the major trades unions in the region, but more in tune, as it turned out, with the views of working class voters who could not see the advantage of a body which would cost money but not have the power or resources to make a real impact on the genuine social problems in the region.

It is clear from the Queen's Speech that the government intends to fight the election with the politics of fear - fear of terrorism, rogue states, asylum seekers and of the prospects of a Tory return. This is all a diversion of the reality of life under New Labour - manufacturing in meltdown, public and private sector pension schemes under threat, state pensioners still denied justice, continued privatisation of public services. While bank profits are booming,

inequality is widening: since 1997 the richest 1/10 of the population in Britain have increased their share of the wealth (excluding housing) from 63% to 75%, while that of the poorer half has fallen from 6% to 2%.

This is a situation which demands a much more robust trade union response than the vague promises which were extracted from the government last July in the form of the Warwick Agreement. In some ways it is good that trade unions have been getting together to demand policy changes, but the Warwick Agreement has actually been used by New Labour to blunt the pressure for genuine new policies. Voting at the TUC Annual Conference, and even at the Labour Conference itself, went far beyond the policy fudge at Warwick.

Many groups of workers have been obliged to take robustness to the point of industrial action over the last year. My own union branch, faced with the threat of compulsory redundancies among lecturers at Northumbria University, balloted and took strike action in May 2004, following it up with a ban on forwarding marks. In the course of this action we received welcome solidarity support from Newcastle TUC and the Northern Region TUC, among others. Our fight was successful in that we avoided compulsory redundancies but as a price we did have to accept the loss by early retirement of a number of our colleagues.

Election or no election, one issue which is going to come up within the next 12 months is the referendum on the European Union Constitution. There is confusion in the trade union movement about the character of the EU, with some unions actually in favour of the Constitution. The EU in fact is far from progressive. It is a supra-national structure furthering the interests of big corporations whose objective is to grow even bigger and maximise their profits. That means mergers, takeovers, job losses, wholesale privatisations and attacks on public services and the welfare state. It means wages, conditions and pensions being driven down under the impact of sharper competition. The draft constitution will make it even more difficult for us to fight these policies and must be rejected.

While British troops are half way round the worlds, fighting wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Bush knows where next, we should not forget that Britain's oldest colony, Ireland, is on our doorstep. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement progress has been made in overcoming sectarian divisions, a process which is anathema to the hard-line rejectionist unionists of the DUP. By continually placing unacceptable demands on the republican and nationalist communities, Paisley's party hopes to reverse the whole peace process and reassert Unionist supremacy in the Northern Ireland statelet. Britain's trade union movement cannot ignore these developments and the Trades Council Executive Committee is bringing forward a motion on this issue to the AGM, for forwarding to the Northern Region TUC Annual Conference.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

SECRETARY'S REPORT

Following the lead of the TUC nationally and locally the profile of international issues has been increased.

At the April 2004 meeting Kevin Rowan the regional secretary of the NTUC reported on his experiences on the TUC visit to Columbia in early 2004. In recent years hundreds of trade union activist have been killed by right wing paramilitaries and many more have fled to safety. A video of the visit produce by Justice for Columbia was seen by some of the delegates at the NTUC International Forum. The year ended in January 2005 with the showing of a video of an earlier TUC Visit in the spring of 2003.

More traditional trade union issues were also discussed at a number of the monthly meetings. In June 2004, John Berry led a discussion on pension and pensioner issues. In July 2004 Kenny Bell reported on the preparation for the ESF in October 2004 to be held in London. And in October 2005 Val Duncan the national secretary of the National Assembly of Women reported on the development of the NAW since its inception in the early 1950's and its various campaigns on women's issues.

In September 2004 we had a discussion on the role of the Newcastle Trades Union Council and the Centre Against Unemployment and their participation in various community organisations. While the delegates were willing to be more involved in principle the limitations of time and resources meant that this was more likely to be an aspiration.

In December 2004 we had a discussion on the NTUC manifesto for the North, while the council broadly supported the manifesto it was felt that it could have been a little sharper in one or two key areas.

The November 2004 had one of the few reports of an industrial dispute from beyond the regular delegates. Kevin Kelly of the PCS reported on the dispute in the civil service and the industrial action planned for the 5th November 2004, and the rally planned for central Newcastle on that day.

As reported last year, one of the ongoing aims for the future has to be to find ways to expand the number of union branches affiliating and delegates attending 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 (i.e. Civil Service). The attack on pension and sick pay agreed over many years and under attack in the public and private sector, The outsourcing and exporting of jobs to lower waged economies is 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 roll in the trades council movement.

JIM SIMPKIN
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

TYNE AND WEAR ASSOCIATION OF TRADES UNION COUNCILS

Tyne & Wear CATUC has continued to provide a useful vehicle for exchanging experiences between Trades Union Councils, and for taking issues both to the Northern Regional TUC and the Annual Conference of Trades Union Councils. All local TUCs, like most nationally, face similar problems of poor attendances and reduced affiliation levels, and the CATUC has been attempting to get to grips with this. In fact North Tyneside TUC has bucked the trend

due to the local campaign to defend council housing. Sunderland TUC made a particular issue of the civil servants' campaign against low pay and to unify national bargaining.

From the beginning of 2005, the CATUC is changing its meeting time and date to 5.30 pm on the first Monday of each month. Meetings will also be structured to minimise routine business and focus, for two meetings out of every three, on a key campaigning issue such as pensions or incapacity benefits.

The Northern TUC's Third Annual Regional Conference was held at The Assembly Rooms, Newcastle, on April 17/18. Among motions passed were Newcastle TUC's on the Environment, and a composite on Pensions which incorporated a motion from Tyne & Wear CATUC. The Conference was suspended on the Saturday to allow delegates to protest at a National Front march in the city.

Campaigning against racism and fascism has been one of the key issues for the Regional TUC, and its "Respect" festival in Sunderland on Monday May 3rd was a very effective demonstration of this approach. Following a one-day workshop in January 2003, the Regional TUC also produced a very useful pamphlet on "Challenging Racism in the North East".

The recent period has been one of sharpening conflict with the government, and this has been reflected both in the motions passed at the Annual Conference, and also in industrial reports brought to the Executive Committee. The Civil Service action over threatened redundancies, the crisis in manufacturing - and shipbuilding in particular - and the current anger at government proposals over public sector pension schemes have been the most prominent of a whole number of industrial reports.

As mentioned elsewhere the Regional TUC was pretty solidly in favour of a Regional Assembly, and invested much time in the unsuccessful campaign for it. With the "no" vote, that matter is off the agenda, but it does not mean that Regional issues have gone away. The Northern TUC has drawn up a "Trade Union Manifesto for the North" which, while not perfect, represents a list of points which it wants to see taken up by the Region's MPs, to win changes in government policies in the interests of trade union members.

The Regional TUC is particularly active on international solidarity issues. Regional secretary Kevin Rowan visited Colombia in January as part of a TUC/Amnesty International/Justice for Colombia delegation, and this has led to a highlighting in the Region of the desperate situation for trades unionists in that country. There are also links with banana workers in Costa Rica and the Sierra Leone Labour Conference.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

NEWCASTLE & GATESHEAD TUC CENTRE AGAINST UNEMPLOYMENT

The CAU has had quite a successful year in 2004. The amount of funding secured during the year has been significantly more than we have had in the recent past. In last years report it was mentioned that the Learning and Skills Council grant would cease at the end of 2003/2004 but we were hoping to gain a grant from the National Employment Panel / Employers Coalition for a study on how to solve the problem of providing casual workers with

educational opportunities. We did indeed manage to succeed in gaining a grant from the National Employment Panel but we were also pleasantly surprised to find out we could apply for another grant from the Learning & Skills Council. An application was duly prepared based on providing IT courses for the unemployed and it too proved to be successful. On the downside though, both grants came through well after the financial year started and are being paid in arrears. This resulted in cash flow problems and the centre had to turn to the Trades Union Council for a loan.

Both of these projects are now halfway through their allotted time, with mixed results from both of them. It was never envisaged that the casual workers educational opportunities study project would be easy but the response of employers to our questionnaires etc. has been somewhat below even our own low initial expectations. Although the initial response of the casual workers themselves to questionnaires was good it is obviously going to be an uphill task to put together a committed group of participants. The numbers of students on the IT courses has been steadily improving but as last years report said reaching a point where they would be self financing is some way off.

Welfare Rights work still carries on at the centre with the co-ordinator recently having to deal with a number of employees being threatened with dismissal.

The campaigning work of the centre continues in conjunction with the National Combine of Unemployed Centres. A "Peanuts" campaign is being pursued which will challenge the low increases in benefits being proposed.

For the coming financial year the centre may be still in with a chance of another grant from the Learning and Skills Council but that is far from certain. The Centre staff are currently working on a number of ideas the co-ordinator has for future projects to help those on benefits deal with the constantly changing benefits system.

ALAN LUBBOCK
(Amicus Durham North)

TRADES UNION STUDIES INFORMATION UNIT

Since Gateshead MBC phased out the funding of TUSIU in the 2001/2002 financial year TUSIU has been relatively dormant.

The bids for funding from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust for the coalfield health project and asbestos victims support group were unsuccessful for various reasons.

This year has seen a small revival in fortunes.

With a small amount of funds and resources from the two groups of solicitors dealing with health and safety issues in the workplace (Thompsons and Browell Smith) and further funds from unions in the region this allowed TUSIU to employ a new project worker John Kelly.

This improvement in funds allowed the Asbestos Victims Support Group to be launched on Workers Memorial Day (28th April 2004).

Since the launch, work has been progressing to build up the profile of the group and also the re-establishment of TUSIU as an organisation.

JIM SIMPKIN
(Amicus Tyneside Engineering)

TYNE & WEAR MAY DAY COMMITTEE

The 2004 May Day March & Rally took place on Saturday May 1 and involved a return to the traditional venue of Exhibition Park for the Rally. Speakers were: Dave Hopper, North East NUM - on the 20th anniversary of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike; Betty Hunter, Palestine Solidarity Campaign; Faz Velmi, former NUS National Executive member; Kevin Rowan, Northern Region TUC Secretary, on the TUC/Justice for Colombia/Amnesty International delegation to Colombia; Jim Cousins MP; and Abdullah Musin, British representative of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions. Music was provided by local young band Snadge van Spearson. This year the May Day brochure was professionally designed, with a good stack of adverts from trade unions and other organisations, and overall the event was a financial as well as a political success, since a significant reserve has been carried forward to 2005. The Committee however is very short-staffed and would welcome more volunteers to work on the 2005 event, which is scheduled to take place on Saturday April 30.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

CHRISTMAS DANCE FOR PEACE AND SOLIDARITY

The 19th Annual Christmas Dance for Peace and Solidarity was held at The Cluny, Lime St, on Wednesday December 22, and was a sell-out event. Performers were Joe Scurfield, The Witches of Elswick, Drummed Up, Drawn by Lines and Bayou Gumbo, a hot Cajun band from Otley in Yorkshire. Beneficiaries were Justice for Colombia, Doctors Worldwide Iraq Medical Project and the Newcastle West End Refugee Service Emergency Fund. For the first time in a few years, the Old Rope Band was not on the bill, but the date and venue worked well, and the Committee is already considering the same for 2005. Volunteers to work on the event will be welcome.

JOE SCURFIELD
(Equity)

NEWCASTLE LAW CENTRE

The Law Centre has seen a lot of changes since beginning life as the Benwell Law Centre in 1978. Over the last two years it has expanded using funding from the Legal Services Commission. In 2004 it was able to add to its existing specialist areas of work through employing a Welfare Benefits caseworker, Andy Malik. The Law Centre now carries out specialist casework (advice and representation at tribunals and courts) for people with problems with employment, housing, immigration and asylum, welfare benefits and discrimination. It also continues with general advice to people and agencies at its drop-in sessions and by telephone.

The Law Centre has also employed Sarah Jones, a second admin assistant/legal secretary (full-time); a new employment caseworker and trainee solicitor, Cleo Gregory (four days per week); and a new immigration & asylum/housing solicitor, Vimbai Chasi (full-time). Two members of staff left in 2004 - Etienne Attala (employment solicitor) left to work in private practice and Ruth Todd (community worker and immigration caseworker) retired. Etienne

had worked at the Law Centre for over 4 years and Ruth for 11 years. Ruth was taken on as a community worker and gradually drifted into immigration casework. She was committed to community development and had a great knowledge of the community the Law Centre serves. She was an excellent immigration caseworker and will be sorely missed by colleagues, clients and the community.

The Law Centre has been extremely busy with casework in 2004 and cannot fully respond to the demand, particularly for housing and immigration/asylum casework. There is a shortage of specialist housing provision in Newcastle (and across the country) and it can be difficult to find another specialist to whom to refer clients. Solicitors across the country have also been dropping out of immigration/asylum casework because of cuts by the Legal Services Commission and increased bureaucratic demands. The Directory of Legal Aid Providers becomes thinner and thinner by the year while demand for advice increases. Legal advice and representation are recognised as playing an important role in combating poverty and social exclusion but the political will to spend sufficient money remains absent.

**SEAN McDONNELL
(Amicus Newcastle 653)**

STOP THE WAR CAMPAIGN/PALESTINE SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN

As the occupation of Iraq continues, so have the killings - not only of the occupation forces, but mostly of the Iraqi people themselves. At the time of writing, the elections have not yet taken place, but a big question hangs over their legitimacy, particularly in circumstances where the occupation forces have destroyed the 300,000-strong city of Fallujah, killing many of its inhabitants and forcing thousands to flee into the desert. For these people and many others in Iraq, the elections are meaningless in comparison with the daily needs of shelter, food, clean water, sanitation and basic health facilities, and it is this resentment which is fuelling the insurgency.

Newcastle TUC has continued to support the campaigning efforts of the Stop the War Coalition to bring an end to the occupation. In October we joined with NATFHE and the local Coalition in sponsoring a visit to Tyneside by Dr Salam Ismael, General Secretary of the Doctors for Iraq Society, representing junior hospital doctors. He gave a graphic description of the destruction of the Iraqi health service by the occupation forces and its depletion by targeted assassinations from insurgents. Dr Ismael was in Fallujah for the first US offensive and witnessed atrocities against unarmed civilians, attacks on clinics and denial of medical treatment through attacks on clinics and ambulances and isolation of the main hospital. In December Dr Ismael returned to Iraq and has sent further harrowing reports of the situation of the ground.

In November the Tyneside coalition held a public meeting against the occupation, addressed by Rose Gentle and a number of other speakers, and with over 100 people present. The national Coalition has called a major demonstration in London on Saturday 19 March, to mark the second anniversary of the war, and locally there will be a number of activities to build up to that. A local demonstration for Saturday 12 February, to coincide with the Labour Party's Spring Conference in Gateshead, is currently being planned.

For our brothers and sisters in Iraq, attempting to build independent trade unions, the situation is extremely complicated. Among the insurgents are remnants of the Saddam regime, who have no compunction about targeting democratic forces. One recent atrocity, the assassination in December of Hadi Saleh, International Secretary of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, is almost certainly the work of Saddam loyalists. While opposing the occupation we also express our solidarity with our trade union brothers and sisters.

Actions taken by the occupation forces in Iraq mirror in many ways the treatment of the Palestinian people by the Israeli occupation forces. However, for the Palestinians the ordeal has been continuing for decades. The planned Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza strip will not bring an end to the occupation any closer, as the Sharon government is intending to strengthen its illegal settlements in, and control over, the West Bank.

Tyneside PSC's campaigning throughout 2004 has concerned both the situation in the refugee camps and the apartheid wall being constructed through the West Bank. Much of the equipment being used by Israel to construct the Wall and to destroy Palestinian homes (often in punitive exercises) has been made by Caterpillar, and PSC held a protest at the company's Peterlee plant to highlight the connection. Earlier in the year, two members of the International Solidarity Movement had presented a photographic exhibition and video presentation in Newcastle of conditions in the Balata camp. In the early Autumn, Tyneside & Durham PSCs co-operated in a joint anti-Caterpillar leafleting session at the Monument in Newcastle, with a half-size mock-up of a Caterpillar bulldozer.

With the death of Yasser Arafat, there have been suggestions from Washington and London of new possibilities for peace in Palestine. However, as long as Israel continues to occupy Palestinian land, any such peace would be unjust and is unlikely to be accepted by the Palestinian people.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)

PEOPLE'S PRESS PRINTING SOCIETY

The *Morning Star*, which is published by the People's Press Printing Society, celebrated its 75th Anniversary on 1 January 2005. To mark that, the 31st December issue was the biggest ever, at 32 pages, including many trade union box adverts. In addition to this issue, Newcastle TUC placed adverts for the Northern TUC Annual Conference, May Day, and the TUC and Labour Party Annual Conferences.

In the wider North-East, the Durham NUM again paid for 2000 free copies of the paper to be distributed at the Gala in July. This coincided with a sales drive in the region which led to a significant increase in daily circulation. However, much of this progress was later negated by the decision of W H Smith, the wholesaler in Sunderland, Durham and Tyneside, to move to a single depot in Gateshead and thereby to bring forward the cut-off time for arrival of the minor titles (including the *Morning Star*). This has meant that, for around 50% of the time, the paper is not distributed in the Tyne and Wear area until the day after publication - a situation which already exists every day in Carlisle and Scotland. Stringent efforts are being made to overcome this, but this demonstrates bluntly how economics (*i.e.* WH Smith's profit margins) undermine any real freedom of the press.

A number of events are taking place throughout Britain in 2005 to mark the 75th Anniversary. Among the first of these is a regional conference at Gateshead Civic Centre on Saturday 19 February, on the theme of "Which policies for a real Labour government?" Speakers include John Haylett, Editor of the *Morning Star*, and Mick Rix, Chair of the People's Press Printing Society Management Committee.

MARTIN LEVY
(NATFHE Northumbria University)