



NATIONAL SHOP STEWARDS NETWORK

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'STOP THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM' A GREAT SUCCESS

CONFERENCE 2009

At the end of the third annual conference of the National Shop Stewards Network in London on June 27th a car worker delegate said, "What a great conference!" And no doubt, hundreds of other trade unionists would agree. Some went away, wanting to set up local Networks; others were keen to relay the events of the day to their workmates back home. Car workers, construction workers, posties, railworkers, teachers, young workers, civil servants and council workers all expressed enthusiasm.

HOW TO WIN

Around 350 delegates and observers came together from across the public and private sector to hear about key disputes over the last year, especially where workers had made gains through strong, determined mass action - or the threat of it! Delegates heard from platform speaker Keith Gibson how the Lindsey workers had, in effect, broke the anti-trade union laws, spread their action and won; from Owen Morris on how construction workers are organising to maintain national pay rates for ALL workers; from John Maguire on how Belfast Visteon workers decided to occupy the factory simply to get justice, acted with audacity and in the end got a result; and from Rob Williams on how Unite members at Linamar moved their union to ballot for all-out strike to get him re-instated - then the bosses caved in!

In addition Andy Littlechild RMT London Underground described the stand-off still in the offing over redundancies and pay. Clara Osagiede RMT Cleaners secretary described how cleaners are treated as second-class citizens. Mark Palfrey of CWU London gave notice of

rolling strikes, whilst raising the possibility of London posties balloting to break the Labour link against a background of 30,000 job cuts, and privatisation. Brian Caton General Secretary POA talked about the urgent need to get rid of the anti-trade union laws, and how direct action brings results. Antonia Bright of SOAS reported on the terrible harassment migrant workers face daily. John McInally, PCS Vice-President, kicking off the afternoon rally, demanded that leaders must lead, and that, in the experience of his union, campaigning works.

DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

There were many contributions from the floor reflecting struggles in all areas and sectors. Also in the afternoon nine crowded workshops took place, which were vibrant discussions, several with conflicting views being thrashed out, on all the big issues of the day, plus one on the lessons of trade unions in the 1930s recession.

STEERING COMMITTEE

Following this an organisational report was given and a new Steering Committee voted in. This Committee will meet in September and all its members' names will be posted on the website.

ROUSING CONCLUSION

The Conference was brought to an end with a rousing speech from Rob Williams, who explained, " There is no mystery to the victories at Lindsey, Visteon and Linamar. They have been won through leadership, strategy and grass-roots organisation. If you fight you may not win, but if you don't, you will definitely lose." The Conference rose to its feet.

What a great day - a small inkling of the fighting power of workers, who, once motivated, can organise in a serious and big way. The NSSN Officers hope that all who attended will be inspired to raise the profile of the Network everywhere in the country by supporting workers in their own, area who are engaged in local or national struggles.

What did you think of the conference?

Were you at the 2009 NSSF National Conference? What did you think? How could we improve our work? Please let us know via info@shopstewards.net. This first contribution to this discussion comes from the President of Northampton Trades Union Council

Comments by Ron Mendel

Thanks for the report on the third annual conference of the National Shop Stewards Network. As a participant I would like to share my thoughts.

While the spirit of the conference was upbeat and the interventions was suitably defiant in the face of the employers' attacks on workers jobs, terms of employment and standards of living, it missed an opportunity to provide concrete guidance about how to address the crisis we are facing.

First, there were too many speeches, full of rhetoric, with little space reserved for discussion and authentic interchange. Even during the time marked for discussion just before lunch there was a tendency for more speeches from the floor. Missing was any discussion of strategy to build the network nationally and regionally as part of an overall strategy to develop networks of effective resistance.

Instead too much time was devoted to pushing the idea of building a new workers' party, which is really outside the remit of the shop stewards network, since at the founding conference emphasis was placed, quite rightly too, on building the structures by which lay activists could support each other in their day to day work within and across their unions. After all, many rank and file

representatives may be members of the Labour Party, the Socialist Party, the SWP or no party at all, and therefore to press for the formation of a new workers party may run the risk of alienating bona fide rank and file activists and thereby retard the development of an independent Shop Stewards Network.

Secondly, the workshops were conducted without identifying any lessons that the conference participants could benefit from. The workshop I attended on 'Public Services Under Threat' produced a healthy and informative discussion of how trade councils and union branches were fighting back. Yet no one was responsible for taking notes, or for that matter for reporting back to the conference itself.

Thirdly, I feel that the afternoon session following the workshops would have been better served if workshop leaders provided the conference with brief summaries of the key points of the workshops, with the understanding that fuller individual reports would be circulated in due course to all conference participants. As it stands virtually all the lessons of that fruitful debate and discussion have been lost, which from my perspective is a crying shame.

Notwithstanding my criticisms above, I came away informed and inspired. I have detailed my thoughts in the hope we can learn from this experience when we organise the next annual conference.

In solidarity,

Ron Mendel, President of the Northampton Trade Union Council