

UNISON Disabled Members Conference 2009

Daniel Anderson-McIntyre

I attended the national Disabled Members Conference of UNISON in Blackpool over the long weekend of October 31st to November 2nd.

As a first-time Delegate to Conference things were a little bewildering at first. Thankfully I soon met a lady by the name of Fiona Heneghan, a Disability Officer from Surrey County Council. Fiona guided me through Conference procedures and helped make sure I was in the right place at the right time.

Whilst at Conference I also met Dan Anderson and his wife Wendy who both use BSL, so I had a chance to practise ready for my upcoming exam and had some interesting conversations with them both.

One of the most bewildering things about Conference was the hotel lobby during breaks and social times. I have never seen so many people using wheelchairs, scooters, powerchairs, crutches, walking sticks, BSL, hearing aids and PAs in one place before. It was nice to go from the office or street environment, where I might be the only wheelchair user in sight, to being just one of the crowd. Everyone was friendly and helpful and the hotel staff were absolute stars.

Conference was also attended by Dave Prentis (General Secretary, UNISON) and Jonathan Shaw (Minister for Disabled People).



Jonathan Straw – Minister for Disabled People

Dave gave an address detailing UNISON's vision of a future in which disabled workers were afforded the same levels of respect as their non-disabled colleagues and also spoke about UNISON's current "One Million Voices" campaign.

Jonathan spoke about the Government's current position on disability working rights, including Disability Leave. There then followed a lengthy Q and A session during which he took questions from Conference and attempted to answer them.

On the last day of Conference one of the agenda items was a motion on Disability Leave, which was something I had spoken to Fiona, Wendy and Dan about several times during the weekend.

Fiona encouraged me to address Conference, which I did.

I spoke about how people working in organisations that did not recognise Disability Leave as separate from Sickness Leave were being disadvantaged in comparison to their non-disabled colleagues. Many people working in these organisations are being taken down Capability process routes by their HR departments simply because they have racked up more sick days than their non-disabled colleagues.

This address was met with rapturous applause and afterwards, during a break, I was approached by several people, all eager to tell me of their experiences. One of these people was Jean Sowley (Regional Chair Disabled Members and National Co-Chair Disabled Members) who told me that what I had spoken about was by no means uncommon and asked me to become more active within the union.



Daniel addresses Conference

On the last evening there was a social event which lasted well into the next morning! I have never before seen a group of BSL interpreters signing karaoke. That's not a typo! Signing. In perfect synchronicity. Dancing wheelchairs (NOT ballroom!), lots of beer and a great atmosphere as well as good company and a lot of laughs all made for a great night.

The weekend was certainly an experience and I have made several new friends. I look forward to returning next year!