Labour Women’s Conference 2019- Coral Jones

Labour Women’s Conference was held in Telford on February 23/24, the first stand- conference of Labour women for over 20 years.

There were over 900 delegates from CLPs and affiliates (which includes unions) and almost two hundred visitors packed into the conference centre. CLPs could send two delegates and to increase diversity of attendees, at least one of the delegates must be BAME, LGBT or have a disability.

The conference was certainly a diverse group with a higher proportion of BAME members and those with visible disabilities than is usual in most LP gatherings.

Conference was structured around eight policy debates which had been selected in the priority ballot on motions in the weeks before. These were Women in the workforce, Early years, Education and Childcare, Pensions, Violence against Women and Girls, Social Care, Abortion Rights, Universal Credit and Employment Support and Rights for Migrant Women.

Each session of 45 minutes discussed a single composite, agreed on the Friday evening. With supporting speeches of 3 minutes, that meant there was time for a significant number of contributions in most debates – many more than in the truncated debates we are able to have at general meetings. The atmosphere was very encouraging to speakers and when there were disagreements on policy, discussion was always respectful.

Many contributions were very powerful, sharing the realities of living in austerity Britain and the struggles women are engaged in to change it. It is great to give a higher proportion of speakers the opportunity to address a large crowd and many women were first time speakers to conference.

There was almost no contention about any of the topics picked. However climate change did not make the priorities ballot list from either CLPs or unions. The question was raised whether the bigger unions are less inclined to put forward climate change motions if they organize in the energy sector?

Jeremy Corbyn and Dawn Butler, the Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities spoke on Saturday afternoon. Both were greeted by huge applause, as was Dianne Abbot. Diane didn't address the conference but she had chaired one of the break-out sessions on Underpaid and undervalued work. There was no doubt that conference was as keen to welcome her, and send solidarity in the face of the vile racist abuse to which she is subject.

The centerpiece of Dawn’s speech was that Labour in government would make flexible working a right for all workers from day one, which she pointed out was predicted to boost the economy by £148 billion. But there was also appreciation for the informality of her speech, she said that “Channeling Dolly Parton is the best way to announce Labour policy” -before continuing with 9-5 playing in the background

Jeremy Corbyn had just come from a huge open-air rally in Anna Soubry’s constituency in Broxtowe. Both there and in Telford he called on all those who had resigned from their parties to do the decent thing and call by-elections, letting the electorate decide. (the TIG group had formed immediately prior to conference)

In the afternoon there was an international plenary with speakers from Zimbabwe, South Africa and Kenya. Powerful contributions, and amazing singing and chanting about the role of women in activism in their various countries and the problems women face.

On Sunday morning there were four further policy debates – Social care, abortion, Universal Credit and Rights for Migrant Women. SHA was represented by myself speaking in the debate on decriminalisation of abortion, a motion which the SHA seconded and supported at the Women's conference in 2018. Parts of the SHA policy on social care had been incorporated at the compositing meeting in the motion on social care.

At the end of conference there was a vote on which motions should go forward to Annual conference. The two motions selected were on Universal Credit and Employment Support and Rights for Migrant Women.

Migrant Women in this motion means women who do not have settled status in the UK such as asylum seekers and other undocumented migrant women, who are often destitute. Women are being charged inflated costs for maternity and neonatal care, putting mothers and babies at risk as women are fearful of accessing care due to lack of funds and threat of deportation.

The motion on universal credit called to scrap the poorly implemented benefit change which is impoverishing many women and their families.

Below is a summary of the debate on social care from a Cambridgeshire CLP delegate who spoke to the motion.

Policy debate – social care  
Social care was a meaty motion, aiming to address both social care staff, as well as family carers (more often women than men). The motion called for numerous improvements including investment, recognition and increased support (including financial) for unpaid family carers, ethical charters, public ownership and a radical review of the direct payments system.

There were strong feelings of support from the conference floor on this one, summarised by the delegate who stated that in social care, market values had penetrated where they did not belong.

Many speakers drew attention to a green paper on adult social care from the government, which has been repeatedly delayed since 2017. The paper includes plans for social care funding and restructuring and the government were accused by conference speakers of “sweeping it under the rug”.