

AUT Newsletter

Produced by Belfast Association of University Teachers

Issue No 8

June 2005

AGM and Call for Nominations

The Annual General Meeting of Belfast AUT will take place on

Wednesday 29 June at 1.05 p.m. in 212 Peter Froggatt

As it is of such major interest the first item on the agenda will be a

Report on Local Pay and Grading Negotiations.

The Annual General Meeting sets the local subscription, hears reports from the outgoing Officers and elects the some of the AUT Committee. (The rest are elected by constituency elections in at Christmas.) I therefore invite nomination for the following positions:

- The President,
- The Honorary Secretary,
- The Secretary for Local Issues,
- The Assistant Honorary Secretary,
- The Honorary Treasurer,
- The Membership Secretary,
- 4 General Members.

All the present incumbents are eligible for re-election. The Committee meets about once a month, usually at Wednesday or Thursday lunchtime. The duties of the various offices are laid down in the rules, and, if you are interested, you can discuss what is really involved with me. Some of you were critical of the AUT Committee during the action; now is your opportunity to see if you can do better!

Nominations shall be made with the written consent of the nominee either by the Committee or by any two members of the Local Association. They should be sent to George Dunn in Computer Services by 4 p.m. on Wednesday 15 June.

Two changes to the local rules will be proposed. One would be to replace the present five faculty constituencies for academic members on the Belfast AUT committee with three constituencies corresponding to the new faculties plus two co-opted positions. The second would enable Belfast AUT to make a donation to a fighting fund to support industrial action by another part of AUT. Increasingly issues of redundancy and of pay, grading and conditions are being fought at local level, but with major implications for the rest of us. At present we have large local funds, and the Belfast AUT Officers believe that supporting members elsewhere (such as at Brunel) who have pay stopped may benefit our own members. Suitable safeguards would be built into the rule.

George Dunn, Honorary Secretary

Local Progress on Pay and Grading

There has been a meeting between the management and all the unions in which each union identified the major issues that they have arising from the QUB pay offer. One universal complaint was that pay scales gave only half the picture and that, until we have job profiles which indicate in general terms how people will map onto the pay scales, we are unable to evaluate the offer. Also discussed was which issues need the participation of more than one union.

Belfast AUT has a negotiating meeting with QUB management on 15 June.

Compared with what had been budgeted for, QUB has saved £4.834M in staff costs this year.

AUT Special Council on Israel/Palestine

MRS WICKSTEED: I'm going to my cake-decorating class. I don't really want to, but we're electing a new secretary and it's like everything else: if the rank and file don't go, the militants take over. — Alan Bennett, *Habeas Corpus* (1973)

I am sure many colleagues will have seen reports in the press about the special AUT Council that was held in London on the 26th May. As the leader of the Belfast delegation I would like to offer a few observations on what was, in my opinion, a truly depressing and quite incredibly embarrassing event which has probably weakened the reputation and unity of our union. The Council was called specifically to allow debate on two motions passed by AUT Council in April which sought to impose an academic boycott on two Israeli universities without, many argued, effective discussion. Sadly the Special Council did not produce a 'debate' but rather provided a platform for the two sides in this dispute to reiterate their entrenched views and hurl abuse at their opponents. One of the particularly conspicuous features was the repeated attempts by both sides to prove their opponents were acting like 'Nazis', not exactly an impressive intellectual argument in the circumstances. In fairness, a few individuals sought to broaden discussion, but they were swamped in the tide of preconceptions and prejudice.

Taken overall I feel it would be true to say that few, if any, of those present sought to defend the behaviour of the current Israeli government, but the policy of academic boycott was opposed for a number of reasons.

- Some colleagues argued that the motions passed in April were based on inaccurate or misleading information and as such Council had been effectively misled and so they should be rescinded.
- Others argued that an academic boycott would not influence the Israeli government but would harm the universities and those academics who have been critical of the current regime for many years.
- It was argued that a boycott would not serve to improve conditions in Israel, but would rather increase tension and hostility between the two communities making compromise and coexistence more difficult.
- Many members (including myself) were concerned about the way the business of Council had been handled and in particular were critical of the decision by the Chair to allow these highly contentious motions to be voted on without debate.

The original motions were carried by 96 votes to 94. At this Special Council there were about 230 voting representatives plus 20 members of the Executive and, while there were accusations that Council had been 'packed' with anti-boycott voters, I would argue that these figures do not support that claim. The mood of Council soon became clear when a proposal that the original motions should be debated was defeated by about 2-to-1. The debate then centred on motions from Southampton and York and a composite motion, all of which effectively called for an end to the boycott. The discussion produced more heat than light and was in my view rather compromised by a motion from the floor to limit the time available to speakers and the Chair's decision to only take selected speakers balanced between the two sides (14 out of 31 who requested to speak).

Finally when Council moved to the vote the three motions were passed by a 2-to-1 majority and the following was adopted as AUT policy.

- That the original resolutions were 'passed in circumstances which precluded due investigation, consideration and debate'.
- The boycott was repealed with immediate effect.
- That the AUT reiterated its long-term position of criticising the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory.
- That a working party be established to fully investigate the situation and brief the next

meeting of Council.

- That the union has been brought into disrepute both nationally and internationally by these events.

Have we learned our lesson? I wish I could say “Yes”, but no sooner had we passed these resolutions than the Chair attempted to steamroller through a large number of other, often again highly controversial, motions as a single debate! Once again the Chair was allowing business to be conducted in a manner ‘which precluded due investigation, consideration and debate’! But fortunately a member of Council moved ‘next business’ and the motions were referred to Executive for consideration and (hopefully) sensible discussion. As a result of this composite motion 6 which offered a reasonably positive way forward based on ‘Positive links between Israeli, Palestinian, British and global academia’ and the equally positive composite 7 were not passed. Our one hope of emerging from this sorry business with some semblance of dignity and leaving a positive foundation for future development was lost due to the Chair’s determination to ‘finish the business’ of Council rather than allow proper debate.

What have we learned? Some members are arguing that we as a union should stay out of international affairs. I personally disagree with this and would argue that unions have a role in such matters. Admittedly it might be useful if certain members of AUT accepted that they were not going to bring down the current Israeli government and that, difficult as we might find it, there are two sides to any argument. As trade unionists should we not be seeking to conciliate rather than condemn? Some people feel that the matter is settled and we can now ‘move on’. Do not believe it! — this issue will resurface and I am sure will cause further controversy within our ranks, although hopefully our Executive will not be taken by surprise again. Others feel that we need to reform our structures to ensure that such a situation does not arise again, although a motion calling for a ballot of all members before future boycotts was defeated by vote of Council. The major lesson is perhaps that we need to be more careful about AUT’s Council and ensure that it represents the views of the membership. One senior member of the Executive argued that Council was ‘sovereign’ (answerable to nobody?), a position which seems sadly undermined by these events. If Council wants to function independently it must rebuild the trust of the members. We must ensure that Belfast AUT sends a full delegation, that Council meets at a time when this is possible (not during the peak teaching period or during the exams), and that the ordinary members are informed about its business and invited to comment to those attending on their behalf. An ideal world? Yes! but if the alternative is another ‘surprise’ shameful vote such as that which took place in April we must work for it.

John Lynch

‘Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes’ — Oscar Wilde.

Possible Merger with NATFHE

NATFHE have now approved putting the issue to a ballot of their members. Before ballots of AUT members and of NATFHE members can be held we must have fixed a name for the new organisation for legal reasons. On the national AUT website www.aut.org.uk you can vote for possible names, or suggest one yourself. Most of the rude acronyms have already been thought of!

Paul Hudson