

Equity Conference Birmingham 18 - 20 May 2024

A brilliant and uplifting Equity Conference in Birmingham last weekend. Equity members gathered together from across the UK.

The event was the best attended with the largest number of women and non-binary speakers. Along with special guests from across the globe.

It was a time to celebrate our many wins and to look back on the struggles we have had to face to ensure the entertainment industry is a better place to work for everyone.

Our conference began with a rousing and passionate address by our President **Lynda Rooke** along with an unbiased words by our General Secretary **Paul Fleming** stating 'the conference of the best union in the best city in the best region in the world.'

The **Shadow Culture Secretary Thangam Debbonaire MP** delivered an important speech saying 'You tell the story of who we are as a country. You bring us face to face with our contradictions. You document our successes.'

Straightaway the first motion was presented by conference brought by the Race and Equality Committee. This was such an important motion allowing full range of political expression for all. This was particularly poignant given the conflicts in Israel-Gaza.

The next motion highlighted by the LGBTQ+ Committee of the extreme right hate campaign has already been established in this country since the 1980's. The motion called on Council to develop political education resources for members and consider how Equity can contribute to the wider anti-far-right movement.

Motion 7 from the North London Branch gave a lively debate amongst conference concerning the addition of a Senior Committee for council. It was passed 38, against 26 but with 39 abstentions, the motion is to be investigated only.

In the afternoon we had the opportunity to attend Fringe Events. I attended four events all very different.

1. **Star Crossed: Representation of Classed Life Stories around British Film and TV Stars**, with Professor Michael Wayne and Dr Deidre O'Neill, talking about class and a film 'The Acting Class' they had created to highlight this issue.

2. **Both Not Half: How My Mixed Heritage Made Me A Trade Unionist**, Jassa Ahluwalia spoke about his life as a mixed heritage man and his call to action which led him being a trade unionist and Equity Councillor. He has created a book 'Both Not Half', which he read from, a radical approach to Mixed Heritage Identity.

3 **Why We Need Intimacy Coordinators**, how this role involves all intimacy including all body contact with your fellow performer, sexual and not sexual.

4. **Fighting the 'Tax on Hope': Using Union Power to End Casting Guide Exploitation.**

Speakers outlined how collectively as a union we can join together and fight this important issue together. All of the events gave me a great insight into these important areas.

Saturday evening we had an International Reception honouring our overseas guests. Welcoming them from Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Estonia, France, Germany, Mexico, New Zealand, Palestine, Poland, South Africa, Turkey and USA.

Executive Director **Al Vincent Junior** of Actors Equity from the USA spoke to us how Disneyland workers were balloting to join a union for the first time. We were later told that this ballot was successful. The final emotive outstanding speech of the night was given by Alrowwad Cultural and Arts Society **Abdelfattah Abusrour** who called on artists to stand in solidarity. He added 'How many more lives should disappear, how many artists should disappear, before we realise ... Not in our name. Not under our watch as artists.' With a resounding standing ovation given to him.

The second day continued with with a speech from new **Coventry South MP Zarah Sultana**. With inspiring words 'Let's build a better brighter world where arts and entertainment are accessible to all, and every single person has the opportunity to reach their potential.

We then had the honour to hear from **Marie Kelly from ACTRA** National, which represents 30,000 recorded media performers in Canada, on their success for collective agreements in commercials.

An emergency motion was then placed before conference to stop cuts and redundancies to the Welsh National Opera (WNO) chorus, which was passed unanimously. The motion also reiterated that the union 'will not accept compulsory redundancies, or the desire by WNO management to have the flexibility of a full-time contract with all the precocity of an unsustainable cut to their basic earnings.'

Conference then considered a motion to be taken to the 2024 TUC Congress. The motion noted that whilst it is illegal to charge upfront fees for work-seekers in most industries, the performing arts and entertainment industries are exempted from this ban. Equity delegates will call on the TUC to support the repeal of this unfair exemption and call for casting directory fees to be borne by producers, not workers. This was passed over whelming by conference.

John Barclay Assistant General Secretary (recorded media) gave a very empowered speech. He thanked members for standing together in solidarity against the commercial networks.

Motion 14 from our Variety, Circus and Entertainers Committee asking to conference to approach the major cruise employers and ask that they put in place measures that artists are seen who travel long distances and are not turned away. This motion was passed unanimously.

Our own motion for Essex and Herts Branch regarding Council to seek to negotiate an increase in the Equity UK stunt rates in line with SAG-AFTRA and US market and Canada market rates. Presented by our branch member **David Guinan-Browne** and seconded by our **Chair Dee Mardi** and passed unanimously. David presented the motion with great strength and emotion and received a standing ovation from conference.

At the conference there were 24 motions with one emergency motion all motions were passed with 4 nem com (without opposition). With exception of motion 7 (North London Branch; the possibility of setting up a Senior Artists Committee) to be investigated only (passed 38, Against 26 and Abs 39).

One of the many highlights of the conference is the Honorary Life Memberships, the union's highest honour. This year went to Abdelfattah Abusrour, director of Alrowwad, Viv Parry, Equity Stage Committee, and Tonia Daley-Campbell, Equity Midlands Councillor.

Our President brought the conference to a close by thanking everyone for attending and looked forward to seeing us in Derry in 2025.

Report by Andrew Alton-Read (Representative for Essex and Herts Branch)