

2011 STUC Women's Conference  
Glasgow  
Monday 14 November 2011

**Speech by Grahame Smith, General Secretary, Scottish Trades Union Congress**

Thank you for inviting me to address your Conference today.

Colleagues, I would like to begin by paying tribute to two comrades who were regular attendees at this Conference and who sadly passed away recently – Linda Shanahan and Campbell Christie.

There is so much to say about Linda Shanahan and very little that I can add to the excellent tribute by Ruth Winters that is in your Conference agenda.

I knew Linda, of course as a very effective member of the STUC General Council and of the Women's Committee. However, I had the opportunity to work closely with her when she led the Prevention of Violence at Work Project. I recall that when I first saw the billboards illustrating the Scottish Government's zero tolerance approach to violence against workers serving the public how proud I was that the trade unions and the Government had made Scotland the first country to launch such an initiative – and much of the work involved was down to Linda.

Her work with the Student Loan Company in tackling 'phone rage' was groundbreaking, as was her work with Community, the Scottish Government and bookmakers to address the issue of violence against workers in betting shops.

That the Prevention of Violence at Work Project was extended beyond its initial pilot phase and is now mainstreamed' into the activities of the Centre for Healthy Working Lives was down to Linda.

Campbell Christie led the STUC through the 1980s and 90s, some of the most difficult times for the STUC and the labour movement. Whether it was in the campaigns to save Ravenscraig or Gartcosh or the Caterpillar factory in Uddingston, or against privatisation or the poll tax and most notably in the campaign for a Scottish Parliament, Campbell forged alliances across

Scottish society which transcended party political boundaries when that offered the best opportunity to make progress.

He did that often in the face of heavy criticism from within the movement. But he did that because he thought it was the right thing to do and because it met the objective of advancing the interests of the working class by putting the trade union movement at the heart of Scottish society.

Our movement and our country are better because of Linda Shanahan and Campbell Christie and are diminished by their passing.

For many years this Conference and the Women's Committee have played a leading role in agitating for a more prominent role for women in the trade union movement and in public life.

It has been a hard struggle and it is far from being won. However, it is important to recognise progress when it is made.

This year, for the very first time in the 114 year history of the STUC, the Annual Congress elected a General Council the majority of who are women. Although our constitution is designed to achieve a greater gender balance it is the appointment of women to leading positions in unions in Scotland, in both lay and officer positions, which has really made the difference.

And we now have a General Council that in terms of gender at least, is more representative of the composition of trade union membership.

I want to say something this morning about the challenges and struggles that we face today. And I want to begin by placing at the top of our list of priorities the greater efforts we need to make as a movement in organising and recruiting in the workplace.

The good news is that, despite the claims that collectivism is dead and individualism rules the day, union membership has been steadily growing in Scotland. Although we saw a small decline this year as a consequence of the economic climate, union membership in Scotland is almost 27,000 more than it was in 2004 and is higher than it was in 1998.

In Scotland we represent more than a third of workers. 53% of union members are women and more than 50% of union members are in what might be categorised as white collar jobs.

A union member in Scotland is now more likely to be a female graduate professional than a male manual worker.

Although we can point to some positives – we need to be honest with ourselves. Union density – the percentage of workers in a union - is down 6% since 1995. Our age profile is rising. Union density is highest amongst the 50+ age group and lowest amongst the 16-24 age group. But Perhaps more worryingly, density in the 25-34 age group, when you would expect workers to be settling into their career, sits at just 21%, well below the overall percentage.

I would like to think things will get better but all the signs are that they could get worse.

Future pressure on trade union membership and density will to come from a reduction of employment in sectors where union density is relatively high - the wider public sector and the utilities and any employment growth which comes is most likely to come in sectors where we currently have a limited presence.

And we have just recently seen the opening shots of the long awaited attack on union rep facility time in the public sector.

Tory backbencher Priti Patel, MP for Witham, previously renowned for her outspoken support for the death penalty, has been waging, through Parliamentary Questions, a campaign to highlight the cost of facility time in the public sector and to question levels of funding going to Union learning.

In this she has eager allies in the right wing media and the Taxpayers Alliance. Last month Aidan Burley the Tory MP for Cannock and Chase in the midlands secured an adjournment debate in the Commons on the public funding of what he called union officials.

His speech and the interventions from his Tory colleagues during the debate churned out all the old rubbish from the taxpayer's alliance about the costs of union rep facility time – not the costs of union officials, they

didn't even understand the difference, without acknowledging any of the benefits or indeed the damage that would be done if there were fewer reps in the workplace.

Last year the Scottish Tories waded in on the cost of teacher union facility time. The EIS response put it in context pointing out that public sector reps across the country give up to 100,000 hours of their own time on union duties.

Their research showed that the work of union reps actually saves the taxpayer between £170M and £400M year. We didn't hear anything about that from the Taxpayers Alliance! Union Reps are worth between £100M and £160M in enhanced productivity each year. They mean fewer dismissals, less disruption from resignations, fewer tribunal cases, up to 13000 fewer injuries at work, up to 8000 fewer cases of work related illness each and every year.

To put the issue into perspective, Scotland's teachers work a collective total of over 10 Million days per year. The 2418 days that the Tories alleged are 'lost' to trade union activity represent just 0.002% of the total number of work-days.

While we are right to think that those who seek to undermine union representation in the workplace narrow minded, short-sighted bigots – they are very dangerous narrow minded, short-sighted bigots. That is why the EIS rebuttal is so important. We must be prepared to rebut each and every time union rep facility time comes under attack.

As we get closer to the coordinated industrial action on pensions justice on 30 November the anti- union propaganda will get louder.

We've already had Danny Alexander claiming that so called union barons are hell bent on a strike on pensions.

Why is it that union General Secretaries are still referred to in the media and by right wing politicians as union barons when CEOs and company directors are called captains of industry?

It is deeply worrying that someone like Danny Alexander can be in such a powerful position in government and be so ignorant about unions and about the law on industrial action.

Doesn't he know that Union members have to vote in a secret ballot in favour of industrial action – and under strict conditions – and under heavy scrutiny by the courts?

We have also had threats about further anti union laws if public sector workers take industrial action over their pensions.

Coalition Ministers have said that they will need to act to stop unions destroying the economy.

It doesn't really need me to point out that it wasn't so called union barons or union power that caused the financial crisis and the current downturn – it was some very prominent captains of industry and the elected politicians and regulators who let them act as irresponsibly as they did.

If Ministers want to act against those destroying the economy they should properly regulate the banks and stop the obscene bonuses paid to senior bankers.

In fact the biggest threat to the economy not the trade union movement it is the economic policies of the Con-Dem government.

We will not be bullied or intimidated by the threats of more anti union laws.

I say to the likes of Danny Alexander: others have tried to use the law to destroy the trade unions and we are still here

And we are not going anywhere, unlike you, who will be looking for a new job after you lose your seat at the next election

Colleagues, let me make one final point in conclusion.

As you know, this year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UCS work in and the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Lee Jeans sit in.

In both of these disputes workers were told that there was no alternative, no alternative to closure and redundancy.

They refused to accept what they were being told - that their industries, their jobs, their communities had no future - that they had to “move with the times”.

These workers refused to accept what they were told was inevitable and they stood up and fought back.

Just like the machinists at Ford in Dagenham – who were told that equal pay was an impossible demand. They refused to accept what they were being told – and they organised and campaigned - they stood up and fought back – and that is how we make progress.

UCS and Lee Jeans, and industrial struggles before and after, were about the right to work; they were about the survival of communities, they were about the demand for fair treatment and equality, for economic and social justice. And these demands united the people then just as they unite us today.

We launched the Better Way Campaign last year because we refuse to accept what we are being told - that there is no alternative to austerity.

But more than that, we refuse to accept the consequences of austerity – the consequences, yes for the economy, but also the corrosive and destructive consequences for our society.

There is an alternative there is a better way. That better way is fair taxation and a living wage. it is jobs; and decent services; fair benefits and stronger communities.

Thank you for the support you, your unions and the Women’s Committee, have given to the Better Way Campaign. I look forward to your continued support in the period ahead – in the run up to and beyond 30 November – when it will be needed perhaps even more than it is now.

That is why we need to take our message – the positive message of trade unionism into the workplace and into the community.

Our arguments - arguments that draw from the experience of our members in the workplace and community - come with the authority provided by the size of our membership. We must continue to win the argument. But we will only achieve the changes we seek if we can grow and mobilise our membership, and get the wider public behind us. That is the key challenge for us all in the period ahead.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of addressing you today and enjoy the rest of the Conference.