



Congress 2011 Review

Unite Response to TUC review of Alternative Congress arrangements

This response is submitted by Unite the union. Unite is the UK's largest trade union with over 1.5 million members across the private and public sectors. The union's members work in a range of industries including manufacturing, financial services, print, energy, construction, transport, local government, education, health and not for profit sectors.

Executive summary

- At the outset Unite reasserts its previously stated position that the TUC Annual Congress should remain a key element of the democratic process.
- The experience gained from the 2011 Congress convinces Unite that for Congress to fulfil its democratic and political role, future Congresses should return to the extended arrangements previously enjoyed.
- Unite is opposed to the continuation of the "alternative" Congress and believes that the best interests of affiliates and the TUC are served by returning permanently to a full Congress with immediate effect.

1. Aims of Congress

1.1. It was always understood that the change to a reduced Congress was driven by a desire and for some a need to reduce costs at that time. At the same time the TUC accepted that "there was a value in retaining an annual high profile event aimed at raising the profile of trade unions; receiving a report of the work undertaken by the TUC in the previous year; identifying priorities for the TUC's work over the coming year; helping shape the work of affiliated unions and creating a sense of unity amongst affiliates; and influencing government, policy makers and other key civic society organisations."¹

1.2. The restrictions placed on larger trade unions in particular on the size of their delegations has created problems and does, as far as Unite is concerned, impinge on its own democratic structures and prevents us from providing a truly representative delegation.

¹ TUC General Council Consultation document Options for Congress December 2009

- 1.3. The London based event did not provide the high profile that full Congresses have done in recent years. Holding a major event in a London basement area, ill suited to hold even the reduced numbers, undermines the profile and limits access.
- 1.4. Of course it has been possible to proceed through the motions submitted, although debates have been stilted and our experience was that many speakers were not able to be heard as efforts were made to keep within the reduced timescale.

2. Costs of Congress

- 2.1. Inevitably if the size of congress is reduced to 300 delegates unions will experience a reduction in their costs. Holding the event in London has however meant that the costs are not reduced as much due to the high costs of hotels in London.
- 2.2. Equally the lack of fringe events has to some extent meant that other costs have also been reduced. The reduction of fringe events has also contributed to the limitation of debate on wider issues which is a clear weakness in the alternative arrangements.

3. Policy making and accountability

- 3.1. Unite was able to contribute in the normal way to policy making within the Congress. The union submitted its 3 motions and 3 amendments and these were all taken in the usual way at Congress. But Unite believes there is more to Congress than simply the submission of motions. The ability of delegates to network and discuss outside of the conference hall is a vital element of Congress. This aspect of Congress was clearly missing this year partly due to the space restrictions of Congress House and partly due to the scattering of delegates across a wider area than is usual at traditional Congress venues.
- 3.2. Unite has referred above to the absence of a wide range of fringe events and this has also impacted on the profile of Congress as it has provided in the past interest to the media to hear more contentious issues which such events often promote and has further restricted the opportunity for visitors and guests to exchange views with delegates.

4. Public profile

- 4.1. Unite is fortunate in having extensive communication resources and, regardless of the venue and shape of Congress, is able to maintain a high profile across various debates. Overall Unite believes that the profile of Congress did suffer from the reduced capacity and arrangements of this year's Congress. This was particularly disappointing given the serious economic and social issues facing trade unionists and their families at this particular time. This is not a criticism of the TUC as none of us predicted the political changes that occurred in 2010 and which have contributed to one of the most difficult periods for workers in the UK.

4.2. It was expected that a London based congress would attract more media coverage but there was no evidence that this happened. Printed media stories were no appreciably higher and TV coverage was limited. The disadvantage of London was that journalists could return to their offices more easily and were less of a captive audience.

5. Congress environment

5.1. Unite recognises the difficulties which holding Congress in London has created for the organisation and congratulates TUC and its staff for the efforts made in such circumstances to present a Congress which broadly met our objectives.

5.2. However, the Unite delegation has expressed to us strong views that the environment in which congress was held was not suitable. Space restrictions in the hall meant that many delegates were uncomfortable. The lack of tables to place papers on meant that following through the various documents was made more difficult if not impossible even for seasoned attendees. Movement of delegates in the hall was noisy and distracting for speakers and delegates alike.

5.3. The services for support staff imposed limitations of access between staff and delegates and being 6 floors apart was not the best arrangement. The TUC did its best to provide appropriate IT facilities but at times these fell short of what was required despite the best efforts of TUC Staff.

5.4. The absence of an exhibition arena was noticeable and was one of those factors that you don't realise the importance of until it is no longer there

6. Conclusions

6.1. Unite acknowledges that the 2011 Congress was a genuine attempt to provide a similar event with reduced resources to meet a need that was envisaged in 2009. Unite supported the move in 2009 as an experiment but made clear at that time that this would need to be reviewed based on experience.

6.2. Our experience has been set out in the preceding paragraphs but in addition to that Unite has listened carefully to its delegation and their views. The overriding view was one of disappointment with the event. Not through any lack of effort by the TUC and its staff but simply that the atmosphere and environment failed to deliver the experience that an annual TUC Congress should deliver.

6.3. Congress is a platform for the Trade Union movement to demonstrate its relevance and influence and weakening that event seriously detracts from that ability. The TUC forms part of the "political" conference season and this provides an opportunity for trade union policy to be viewed in a much broader economic, social and political environment.

6.4. Of course cost is a factor and the TUC has limited funds as its affiliates do. So choices have to be made, priorities determined and once a year Unite expects Congress to raise the trade union profile onto a national stage in a political context. The image portrayed was reflected in Mary Riddell's article which said:

“...the rump of 300 delegates attending the annual congress are gathered this week not at the seaside, as is their wont, but – for the first time since 1902 – at the TUC’s London base. Those who once ruled Britannia cannot now command the price of a whelk supper.”²

6.5. The Congress this year was missing that element and as such failed to meet the prime objective of this annual event. It is for this reason in particular that Unite believes that TUC must return to the full Congress arrangements next year and for all subsequent years.

Len McCluskey
Unite General Secretary
Unite House
128, Theobald’s Road
Holborn
London WC1X 8TN

Contact for further information:

Roger Jeary
Roger.jeary@unitetheunion.org

Tel: 020 7611 2630

² Daily Telegraph 12th September 2011