

23 May 2024

Green bargaining

How to get green issues into a trade dispute was examined in-depth at a conference fringe meeting on Wednesday.

The fringe event was chaired by acting deputy president Jackie Green.

The first speaker was John Moloney, PCS Assistant General Secretary, who celebrated the progressive green motions passed that day. He expressed concern about a race to the bottom on green issues by political parties in forthcoming election campaigns in the effort to win votes. But as well as unions making political demands on green issues, John underlined that we can make demands of the employer: climate change can't be exempt from strike action when it's a fundamental threat to humanity. Anti-union laws make it difficult but not impossible to craft a trade dispute over green issues.

Marianne Quick, bargaining and negotiations official at UCU, spoke of how she leads Just Transition claims within pay bargaining in post-16 education sectors. Climate crisis is a worsening reality and will impact every sector. In education, she asks members what skills they might have to enhance demands, how they want to contribute, to work out the risks to their sector, and how they can prepare for Just Transition. UCU members have built capacity through political CPD, green reps training, green committees at branch and national levels, and developing a Just Transition framework. Facilities time is key for reps – only unions will make a Just Transition happen.

Climate justice

Professor David Whyte teaches climate justice in the school of law at Queen Mary University of London. He compared union work on green issues to UK health and safety legislation which emerged in the 1970s from workers and employers identifying shared concerns. However, the biggest threats from climate change are to workers, not employers. For a transition to a zero-carbon economy to be just, it must be worker-led. Ultimately, he said, businesses will have to slow down the economic intensity that produces excess value.

Athene Dilke, Defra London and SE, is an experienced climate change policy worker who was on the UK COP26 presidency team. She explained that she and her colleagues are fearful of breaking the civil service code by criticising government. At the same time, they have obligations to the public and government failures breach their contracts under the civil service code.

Athene offered several areas for optimism: the UK actually has excellent domestic policy and is signatory to progressive international treaties; there have been extraordinary legal actions under the Climate Change Act; the Office for Environmental Protection investigates policy failure and can be alerted more; there are possibilities for judicial reviews and to work with the chief scientific officer. Athene concluded that civil servants who are climate and environmental experts need to know they can dissent and feel confident in union support.