It’s up to us

“Wouldn’t it be great,” they said “to do a small booklet marking UNISON’s 20th anniversary – especially as Conference is in Liverpool”. Wouldn’t it? It’d need a couple of people who knew the history of the region – a couple of people who never throw anything away – Hont and Gwilt perhaps...
And so it came to pass.

It has been a hugely enjoyable if extremely difficult task to summarise the work of UNISON over 20 years in a few short pages. So before you read it and send in your letter of complaint...we apologise!

We have done our best to cover, albeit incredibly briefly, some of the main events in our union’s history – mainly from a regional point of view but interwoven with national and international events to give some wider context. Frank has trawled his voluminous personal diaries, first as regional lay activist, then as NEC member and finally as our Regional Secretary. Steve has had the enviable task of ploughing through 20 years of Regional Council minutes, conference and regional newsletters...

It is of course an impossible task to fairly represent two decades of work of UNISON’s biggest region (itself larger than many national trade unions). What do you include? What do you leave out? More importantly who do you include and who do you leave out? Unfortunately we’ve had to leave out more than we would like to.

Aside from Regional Secretaries we’ve not covered the work of our full time staff at all. This was a difficult call because there have been and continue to be so many dedicated full timers. But it is impossible to include some and not others. The truth is that the staff from the cleaner to the General Secretary have all played a major part in UNISON being where it is today. No matter how unbiased and neutral we have tried to be inevitably it comes down to the personal experience of the writers. Suffice to say that as a region we have been extraordinarily lucky in the full time staff who have served us – and continue to do so. Thank you all.

A similar question then arises over which activists and lay officials should be mentioned. Again it is an impossible question to answer – there are literally thousands of you across the region. Some of you aspire to regional office. But there are many more who do your day to day jobs, your shop stewarding, branch officership, health and safety work, learning rep or any of the other million and one jobs that get done in branches. These are the jobs that make the union what it is. To you all we offer our thanks and admiration – and apologies that we cannot name every one of you individually.

But we have named what we hope is a representative few. We’ve also asked some activists from the past and present to come up with their personal view of particular issues which we’ve scattered throughout the booklet. What amazes you as you read through our recent history is the extraordinary breadth and depth of what we do. Yes it’s the day to day
stuff on pay and pensions, on grievances and disciplinaries and terms and conditions. But it’s so much more.

It’s the campaigning work to make our world a better place. Our anti-racist work; our international solidarity work; our support for the arts. It’s our work in local communities and our political work for the Labour Party. It’s our standing up for the wronged, the oppressed, the weak and the poor – wherever they are. And long may it continue.

We hope that this hastily pulled together booklet will provide a few happy memories. We’re sorry that there are also a few unhappy events too. Most of all we hope it will remind us that we are stronger when we work together, and that being in a union especially one like ours is worthwhile. Most of all we hope that it will enthuse and encourage you to do more. Spread the word, recruit some more of those 20,000 people a year we need to recruit just to stand still – and organise! There are not many people able to fight for the worst off in society or protect our first class public service ethos that we all grew up with. It is up to us…

Steve Gwilt
North West Publicity and Campaigning Committee

Frank Hont
Life Member

May 2013
The formation of UNISON was not a simple task. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE) were both proudly affiliated to the Labour Party whereas the National and Local Government Officers’ Association (NALGO) was not. But although the three unions had very different cultures and backgrounds all were passionate about the public services provided by their membership.

The murmurings of merger of the late 1980s soon turned into detailed discussions. There was much at stake and many outside the three unions wanted us to fail. There were genuine concerns too in all three partner unions but from the summer of 1990 there was much more consultation with members and branches as report after report landed in our laps.

All three annual conferences in 1990 were presented with a joint report from the COHSE, NALGO and NUPE National Executives – ‘NEW UNION – The challenge of a new union’ (catchy little title that wasn’t it?). It was signed off by the three Presidents; Colin Robinson, Rita Donaghy and Mike Page and the three General Secretaries; Hector Mackenzie, John Daly and Rodney Bickerstaffe.

But why build a new union at all? The following points were the starting point. A new union would…

• Provide a better service for members
• Be a wholly new union with its own objectives and character
• Build on the strengths and traditions of COHSE, NALGO and NUPE
• Organise over 1.6 million workers
• Be the largest union in the TUC
• Represent a broader range of public service workers than any other union in Western Europe
• Exert a major influence over future public service policy – in Britain and in Europe
• Bring together members of all three unions by service, occupation and grade – increasing their overall bargaining strength in fighting for improved pay and conditions and better services
• Provide a greater strength to defend public services and campaign for improved provision
• Combine the three unions’ resources, full-time officers, expertise, communications, publicity and democratic services
• Ensure members in larger and smaller services enjoyed improved support and facilities
• Be better equipped to face competition from merged and ‘super’ unions
• Build on the common interests of members and end wasteful competition, conflict and duplication of resources between the three unions
Campaigning for a Yes vote in the run-up to the ballot that would bring about a new union

6

Campaigning for a Yes vote in the run-up to the ballot that would bring about a new union

25 OCTOBER 1992/ISSUE SIX

Big turnout is essential

Campaigning must go on right up until the day the ballot closes. But once members receive their ballot papers, there is an extra task: maximising the turnout.

The decision on merger is one of the most important and far-reaching NALGO has ever taken. It is vital that as many members as possible vote—and vote YES—to give the result the greatest possible authority.

New publicity

To encourage members to vote, new items of publicity are available for use while the ballot is in progress:

- an A4 poster for workplaces, written in the words of the Yes campaign: NALGO, NUT and UNISON members are voting YES for a new union.
- an A4 poster for workplaces, written in the words of the Yes campaign: NALGO, NUT and UNISON members are voting YES for a new union.
- a newsletter, saying YES is NALGO's, available in both English and Welsh versions, consists of 8 pages, is suitable for use during the run-up to the ballot

Use your AGMs for UNISON

This year's Branch AGMs are especially important in preparation for the UNISON ballot.

As Branch AGMs are often the first major meeting of members, they provide an ideal opportunity for a speaker to address your branch about the UNISON campaign and ballot.

Dietary officers will be able to arrange for speakers from national, local or regional Unison. Alternatively, they can be asked to attend AGMs, or hold a meeting or a briefing.

Balloons (lots) and other materials have been produced at Joint and All-Unison events.

UNISON campaign materials are being prepared by the Public Labour Relations Department. For a list of dates for AGMs, see page 5.

What's new?

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• Increase membership by targeting weak areas and attracting other organisations
• Collectively mount an attack on low pay
• Better represent managers, supervisors and specialists
• Mount a full-scale attack on discrimination and support positive programmes to counter its effects

Our new union would have real aspirations, and genuine and progressive aims...

A year later and the annual conferences of 1991 considered a document, ‘Framework for a New Union’ – a joint report on merger. Concerns were expressed about branch structures, staffing, political affiliation, regional organisation and bargaining structures as the debate continued.

By the 1992 conference season the North West (and North Wales!) District Council of NALGO was one of six ‘districts’ (along with the North East, Scotland, London, Southern and South East) jointly working for the New Union concept.

Here in our region COHSE, NALGO and NUPE senior elected officials were meeting on a regular basis – and we were starting to talk about UNISON.

The majority view in the region was that no other union merger had ever been the subject of so much detailed discussion. The process had not been perfect but was still worthy of praise. There had been sufficient discussion – let’s get on with building a new democratic, campaigning union.

There were still dissenters, over a range of issues including campaigning; the role of full time staff and lay members; about smaller groups being swamped by local government branches; finance and even the name of the new union. But in the summer of 1992 the three national conferences each voted in favour of UNISON.

For the record the votes were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Union</th>
<th>For:</th>
<th>Against:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NUPE</td>
<td>4,980 (62%)</td>
<td>3,099 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COHSE</td>
<td>2,133 (70%)</td>
<td>918 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NALGO</td>
<td>424,888 (71%)</td>
<td>175,388 (29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A full membership ballot followed and the result was a resounding YES to the new union.

Three years of intensive negotiation and consultation had led to the launch of UNISON. Constitutional building blocks were put in place before the membership ballot but we still had to overcome former union loyalties and develop a common culture.

That culture would need generosity, partnership working and mutual cooperation – but isn’t that what trade unions are about anyway? Looking back with the benefit of 20 years’ hindsight you have to wonder what all the fuss was about really – but it didn’t seem so obvious at the time…
3,032 branches and not a single one merged

The new union was created in June 1993 and our very first Regional Council met in November in a windswept Floral Hall in Southport. Most of the meeting was spent discussing a draft constitution, rules and standing orders – now there’s a surprise. And of course although we were in UNISON there were 3,032 branches – and not a single one had merged.

Reflections Roger Bannister

Strains of the song ‘We Said We Wouldn’t Look Back’ from the musical ‘Salad Days’ came into my head when I was asked to pen some lines about UNISON’s first twenty years! I recall the Interim NEC, a combination of all the three NECs of the former partner unions. Members of each union had different votes, 1, 1.5 or 2 in an attempt to provide equality, and a couple of votes were actually carried by a majority of half a vote! The years of fights and horse-trading had finally produced this new union, which bore my personal stamp in two places; the establishment of a lay committee to have the final say over industrial action and the inclusion of the Isle of Man in the union, since I spotted its omission from the original proposals for the regional boundaries!

In the Branch Office, Vesting Day was marked by constant telephone calls from members who wanted their problems solved, most of who were ringing the wrong branch. Organisational niceties like there being a Knowsley Number 1 and a Knowsley Number 2 Branch meant little to them. As far as they were concerned they had been waiting for this day to be able to right the wrongs, and this persisted throughout that first week and beyond.

For me UNISON came into its own with our first strike in the branch. Low paid women in the Knowsley Care Society were successful, at least for a while, in pushing back attacks on their pay. Then came our legal victory for Home Carers, overturning as discriminatory cuts in conditions of service imposed by Knowsley’s right wing Labour Council. Clearly UNISON could deliver for working women!

Roger Bannister

The economic crisis, large scale redundancies unemployment in the North West of 400,000 or 20% led us to support the People’s March Against the Tories and the TUC’s unemployed centre campaign – One Fund for All. We roundly condemned Tory plans for a pay freeze in 1994/95 and a massive turn-out was demanded for the TUC NHS Emergency Day in London on 20th November.

Regional Council also heard Jean Geldart from Tower Hamlets talk about poverty and racism. We agreed to affiliate to the Anti-Racist Alliance while locally we gave full support to Liverpool UNISON member Bayo Omoyiola who was faced with deportation.

January 1994 saw our first Regional Council AGM at St George’s Hall Liverpool and new President Ken Orme took up the reins. Vice President was Lynn Evans, Convenor was a youthful Pat McDonagh with deputies of Marion Simon and Sandy Bell.
Zukelwa Mlakalaka from the African National Congress was our first international guest speaker who spoke about South Africa and the elections scheduled for April 1994.

Regional Council was complaining about the lack of progress on staffing structures, delays in setting up an effective membership register and the lack of consultation over branch organisers and administrators. We also discussed the setting up of a regional branch merger working group.

Several branch secretaries were under attack from their employers during our first year including Frances Kelly (Christie Hospital Trust), Nigel Flanagan (Sefton) and John Pearson (Tameside). A legal victory had been achieved around TUPE at Aintree Hospitals Walton site.

Reflections Pat McDonagh

I had the great honour of being the first Regional Convenor of North West UNISON. I would like to think it was universally acclaimed from the outset. But when it was first suggested at a pre-merger joint COHSE, NALGO, NUPE regional activists’ meeting in Bolton it caused a walkout by many!

After a blood-on-the-walls talk between regional lay leaders we developed a mutual trust which meant our branches in the North West were at the forefront of branch mergers from the outset.

In Manchester Council this meant EIGHT separate NUPE branches merging together with the single NALGO branch.

UNISON Rules said a Convenor’s only role was to chair Regional Committee and Regional Council. Being the North West I never did either and we had a team of six lay officers in the regional secretariat to share the leadership. But all senior lay activists shared in the work to really build our union with support from regional managers.

At an early meeting of Regional Secretaries, Rodney Bickerstaffe asked me why only he and I were wearing a UNISON tie. I said it was because we had the same poor dress sense! He was perfect as our General Secretary.

Together we all built a fine regional union, but for me we should have made a greater impact within the Labour Party in terms of policies. But that is something we can pursue for all our futures.

20 years of success in UNISON and, hopefully, the best is yet to come.

Pat McDonagh
Pit closures, Sign Up and a Woman’s Right to Choose

April 1994 saw Regional Council’s first visit to Preston Town Hall where we heard an impassioned Sylvia Pye from Women Against Pit Closures talk about the campaign to save Parkside Colliery.

One notable minute of the meeting reads “This Regional Council rejoices at the prospect of a newly created democratic society in South Africa”.

In October Regional Council decamped to the Armitage Centre in Fallowfield Manchester. New North West MP, Angela Eagle spoke about the threat to North West Blood Transfusion Service where 400 jobs were threatened from the closure of two of the three regional centres.

Over 25,000 members had been recruited since vesting day and 48 branch mergers had been submitted for national approval – although none of them were in the North West.

Regional Council discussed motions on the Child Support Act, Economic Policy and the Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value cases at Cheshire County.

Nationally UNISON agreed to affiliate to the National Abortion Campaign. The closure of the Elderslie Hotel, a union-owned hotel in Largs, Scotland used for many a training course was also agreed by the NEC.

1994 also saw the Sign Up campaign. This was where Tory anti-union laws said that members who had their subscriptions deducted from pay by their employers – so called DOCAS or check off, had to re-authorise that arrangement every five years. It was a significant organisational challenge but at the end of a huge amount of effort 94.5% of members in the North West signed up again.

Denis Maginn, Branch Secretary of Salford Local Government branch was now chair of the Regional Committee.

A member-led union

Back to the future.

The first National Conference of our new union in Bournemouth in May 1994 was dominated by the need to take the initiative against government policy and attacks on public services.

“UNISON will not allow the government to use public service workers to bail them out of the financial mess they created for themselves” said Alan Jinkinson, UNISON’s first General Secretary.
Conference also approved a rule change saying that UNISON would be, “membership-led” and not “membership centred”...

A key decision on what had been a major concern for many former NUPE activists was that UNISON conference would not be able to dictate to the affiliated political fund (APF now Labour Link) on Labour Party policy.

Conference also paid tribute to John Smith (1938-1994) Labour Party Leader who had died earlier that year.

In 1994 UNISON had three joint presidents – Brenda Hudson (NALGO), Colin Robinson (COHSE) and Micky Bryant (NUPE). Micky spoke from the heart in a speech which set the tone for conference. He said “UNISON is part of the fabric of a civilised and just society. We have to get it right – not just for our members but for the people of this country”.

At that first National Conference our regional delegation included: Ken Orme, (Regional President); Marjorie McDermott and Pat McDonagh (Regional Delegates), Kevan Nelson, (Chairperson, NW Local Government Committee); Judy Cotter and Ray Roberts (Local Government Regional Delegates).
Political fund ballot and Compulsory Competitive Tendering

The lack of membership cards was one of the hot topics of Regional Council in February 1995. This was a message that was heard loud and clear by our guest speaker, a certain Dave Prentis, then a Deputy General Secretary. Having got ‘sign up’ out of the way the next anti-union hurdle to overcome was the need to carry out a ballot on the political funds. Then as today we are unique in having a choice of whether to be in a political fund at all and if we did want to be in one whether it was the section affiliated to the Labour Party or not – a continuing reminder of the separate traditions of the former partner unions.

Regional Council also talked about the Branch Funding report heading for National Conference that year. Other matters discussed included a TUC march against unemployment between Liverpool and Sheffield, the union’s publication of a ‘Violence in the Home’ booklet and CCT (compulsory competitive tendering) which by today’s right-wing standards was a rather mild attempt at the back-door privatisation of local government services but at the time seemed extremely serious.

June 1995 saw our second national conference in Brighton and we prioritised six issues for debate: The Economy; UNISON and Ireland; the NEC Strategic Review; Legal Advice Outside working hours; Branch Funding and Conference Procedures – so, two motions about the outside world and four on internal union issues! But that was hardly surprising when you consider that we were only in the second year of putting together the UK’s biggest trade union.

21 October 1995 saw UNISON’s national demonstration and family fun day – Public Service not Private Sleaze which aimed to highlight the problems of government policies that put profits first and people last. Those who ended up at Southwark’s Burgess Park – after quite a march were entertained by Billy Bragg and Hank Wangford! This was the first national appearance of the Fat Cats roadshow – which had been launched by Rodney Bickerstaffe earlier that month in Blackpool.

1995 was also the year we kicked off a school meals campaign in the region. Maureen Tyrell Chair of the Manual and Craft Committee (remember that?) was keen to develop a network of school meals contacts and evaluate the effects of competitive tendering on the quality of meals and the terms and conditions of the workforce.

Northern Ireland, PFI and Organising

1996 was another landmark year for the region. All branches except one had submitted merger forms and the central collection of members’ subs was to be phased in by January 1997. Despite the opposition the world didn’t end…
The first changes to our regional lay leadership also took place with President Ken Orme retiring – he had been chair of the regional COHSE body for 18 years before UNISON. Lynne Evans from Manchester Branch stood in for the remainder of the year.

It was the first time the Private Finance Initiative was mentioned in the minutes.

But the highlight of Regional Council in March 1996 was undoubtedly the address by Inez McCormack, UNISON’s Regional Secretary in Northern Ireland. She gave a deeply moving but hopeful address about cross community initiatives around human rights and equality. UNISON then as today continues to act as an agent for positive change championing justice and equality for all in Northern Ireland. Inez died recently but the work she and others did gave real hope and proved to be the right answer in that troubled country.

Regional Council also heard sacked Liverpool dockers speak about the dispute where the Mersey Docks and Harbours Company had sacked 500 workers in September 1995.

We also talked about a Regional Strategic Review, the Borough Care Dispute in Wigan and supported the anti-deportation campaign of Manchester Metropolitan University member Florence Okolo.

We were also successful in securing European Grant money from the Leonardo Da Vinci fund. This was for a project to establish a network committed to setting up learning and occupational opportunities for manual workers. Debbie Brannan Vice Chair of the Manual and Craft Sector Committee was keen to see all branches promote this ‘Stepping Out’ project.

At our Fourth National Conference in 1997 we were talking about ‘organising’. The NEC reported to Conference on its strategic review, “making local organisation our priority” recommending there should be branch and regional development plans.

The report also called for the decentralisation of services, including a “planned and ordered movement of staffing resources from national to regional level”.

**1997 and a New Labour Government**

A Labour Government at last and at the time one that gave many of us new hope after the Thatcher and Major years. In the North West Carolyn Baker and Frank Duffy commenced their three years as regional president and vice president respectively. The Regional Youth Officer was one John Jones.

On 1st June 1997 we ran the All Different All Equal festival in Manchester’s Heaton Park as part of the European Year Against racism. It was the “best free party in town” according to the Manchester Evening News and as well as fairground rides there were headline acts like rap superstar Ice T.
In October we heard National President John McFadden speak on the need for links with the new, (New) Labour government. We had a lengthy shopping list - campaigns to achieve a National Minimum Wage, establish a Scottish Parliament, give greater devolution to Wales and also the regions not to mention demands to drop PFI and Best Value.

Other items Regional Council was concerned with were the Fuel and Water Poverty campaign; 20 redundancies at Halton College and strangely enough a few complaints about the membership record system – the dreaded UMR. There was also much discussion about branch autonomy and the rights of regions and branches to campaign to change policy, and of course the Guide to Good Branch Practice…

If it looks like a duck...

Our North West Regional Delegates to our fifth conference in Bournemouth in 1998 were Kevan Nelson and Lynne Morris. It was the end of the first full year of a new Labour Government and UNISON was ready to tell them where to go (next) – especially on the new National Minimum Wage. But first the important internal stuff! North West Region backed Scotland in their efforts to reaffirm the rule book position that, “It is not permissible to use members’ subscriptions and branch funds to finance external political organisations or organised factions within the union”.

The debate will be long remembered for Rodney Bickerstaffe's famous, “if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks...” speech.

Mo Mowlem addressed Conference as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and we should never forget her contribution to the peace process.

The big question in the rules debate was whether conference would accept the union’s new disciplinary rules. Answer? No – and these new rules would come back to Conference again, and fall again…and again.

The NHS was 50 in 1998 and UNISON was at the forefront of defending it and opposing PFI.

Tameside Care Group, fighting for a Living Wage and a Strategic Review

One of the biggest disputes in 1998 was the Tameside Care Group Dispute. Some staff took pay cuts of around 30% when the company was spun off from Tameside Council in 1992 to run its elderly people’s homes. Further pay cuts were proposed and in late 1997 the Group stopped sick pay and axed holiday entitlement. “Enough is Enough!” was the slogan and the carers began indefinite strike action.
Meanwhile colleagues on the International Relations Committee were selling mugs to raise funds to bring two South African trades unionists over in October. Credit Unions were in the headlines and CCT was on the way to being abolished.

We set up a Regional Youth Forum and a North West Public Utilities Reform Group (PURGE). One of the most colourful demonstrations took place on 10 April 1999 when we took to the streets of Newcastle as part of our campaign for a Living Wage.

Carole Horsfield became our deputy Convenor while some long-standing NEC members stepped down including Carol Lyle, John Smethurst and Maureen Vass. We awarded Life Memberships to E Ashley (Halton), P Beer (Trafford), Magda Gillow (Lancs), I Kearney (Wirral), Denis Maginn (Salford), B Peat (North West Gas), and J Wilkinson (Lancashire County).

By November 1998 UNISON was deeply immersed in a Strategic Review. There were no proposals to change lay structures but there was much discussion about Branch Development Plans, devolution, a shift of resources to branches and a new organising strategy for the union. It was conceded that regions were overstretched and that “National level is trying to be operational when it shouldn’t be”. The centre should be strategic… (!)

Remember all those “bee active in UNISON” logos?

Worrying about the Millennium Bug... while Kosovo burned

Our North West Region took a principled position on the Kosovo crisis in May 1999 and presented a motion to the NEC.

We argued that the NATO bombing had to stop. Some NEC members talked about ‘targeted’ bombing; about NATO’s good intentions. Frank Hont and Roger Bannister presented a united North West position – if you are being bombed you are being bombed. “How many more people have to die before we put a halt to it?”

The NEC was split as members talked about being ‘at war’ and supported an alternative position set out in a motion that didn’t say that much. After what was probably one of the liveliest debates ever held in the union’s NEC, a Presidential Team statement was voted on – Result 21-21! Then the North West motion was voted on – 24 for 21 against. CARRIED! As was an original NEC statement from the previous month.

So, where to go from there? It was left to the General Secretary to produce a compositied statement reflecting all the content. Anyone ever see that statement?
In the post: campaigning postcards 1998 – 2002
1999 also saw a major under 12s soccer tournament held in Liverpool and organised by Raph Parkinson under the Show Racism the Red Card banner.

There was lots of talk this year about ‘the new millennium’, ‘into the millennium’ and the millennium bug. No, not Star Wars, just the upcoming year 2000. This was also the year with the worker ants of UNISON featuring in TV adverts and making UNISON a talking point.

**5th Anniversary and 50 years of the NHS**

In the year running up to Conference 1999 we had enjoyed our 5th anniversary, joined in the celebrations for 50 years of the NHS and were looking forward to a National Minimum Wage in Britain. The Labour Government had increased spending on public services but we were pushing hard for the people – especially our members – who make it work to get a better deal in pay and jobs.

New delegates to Conference often complain about the number of motions, the range of subjects and the sheer volume of business. And 1999 was no exception. There were 15 composites on the agenda: Public Services; Finance and Taxation; European Economic and Monetary Union; National Minimum Wage; PFI; Employment Rights; Health and Safety; Domestic Violence; and on and on. Then there was the internal wrangling about our own union’s disciplinary rules and internal democracy with Sheffield and Birmingham branches having been suspended.

**Fighting for Justice: Stephen Lawrence**

Conference has always invited speakers from the international trade union movement or the political arena. At our 1999 Conference Neville Lawrence spoke about the murder of his son, Stephen. It was six years earlier that Stephen had been subjected to a racist killing in London.

“When my son left my house I didn’t know that six hours later I would see him dead, on a slab and be told it was because he was black”.

UNISON President, Alison Shepherd, presented Neville with a donation of £5,000 to the Stephen Lawrence Trust and started our long term commitment to Neville and Doreen Lawrence in their fight for justice for Stephen.

In October we were gearing up for the General Secretary’s election and at the NEC Roger Bannister was nominated as one of the candidates to stand against Dave Prentis who the Regional Council supported.
Salud! And Our Day in the Dome

Continuing our proud tradition of internationalism we became involved in the work of Jubilee 2000 – which demanded that the debt of the world’s poorest countries be cancelled. This was also the year of Salud! – a trade union ship for Cuba where tons of medical supplies and other equipment was donated to Cuba, co-ordinated by Bob Oram of the Manchester branch.

Reflections Bob Oram on Cuba

In May 2003 the Region took 17 young people from the riot torn estates in Oldham, 4,656 miles to Matanzas in Cuba, to see the fruits of their work maintaining ambulances donated by members to the health service in Cuba.

It was an inspirational initiative. The youth inclusion project and the Cuba visit were life changing experiences for the young people for which UNISON was highly praised. A book was published to commemorate the trip.

Bob Oram

It was a year of terrible personal tragedies too. NEC member Bob Cotton on his way to an NEC meeting in London died in the Paddington Rail disaster. Nearer to home came the sad news of Cheshire activist’s Ann Chadwick’s untimely death. Council made a donation to the Working Class Movement Library in her memory.

We began talking of the Tobin tax – later known as the Robin Hood tax on banking transactions. We heard John Hendy QC talk about Fairness at Work and Rita Donaghy, (then president-elect of the TUC) on the work of the Low Pay Commission. UNISON Direct was first proposed.

Labour introduced the North West Regional Development Agency which began life on 1 April. The Campaign for a Living Wage rolled on with ahem, our “Day in the Dome” at the Millennium Dome in Greenwich on 1 May. We opposed the concept of directly elected mayors and cabinet style rule in local councils. We moved into our brand new regional centre, Arena Point on 3rd March 2000.

Brian Devine was re-elected chair of NWTUC and Carole Horsfield onto the Executive Committee. We gave Life Memberships to Carolyn Baker (Wirral), Pat Bell (Liverpool) and Angela Glanville (Liverpool)

Disputes that year included those at Manchester University (pay), Salford (financial crisis and loss of 400 jobs) Central Manchester Healthcare (cuts), Greater Manchester Police (JE), Bolton College (redundancies), United Utilities (outsourcing), Liverpool College (pay) and the externalisation of services at Blackburn with Darwen.
The end of an era – thanks Rodney

Rodney Bickerstaffe said farewell to UNISON at the 2000 Conference.

His speech brought on tears, cheers and nods of approval as he thanked the thousands of people he had met on his way – “ordinary members, our people”, trade union leaders, members of staff and past presidents of the union. What unites us? He asked – and in typical Rodney style gave us the answer,

“The true basis for any caring society must be public services provided from the public purse, staffed by men and women properly trained and decently paid”.

He paid tribute to General Secretary elect, Dave Prentis, who was undergoing treatment for a stomach tumour. Closing Conference he said:

“I came from the working class. I’m proud of that class and I’m proud to work for it. I’m greatly privileged to be your General Secretary in this wonderful, diverse union family”.

Humility and leadership of the highest order from a true man of the people.

Public Service – it’s the future!

Guess what UNISON’s two motions to the TUC were in 2000 – you knew it really – The Future of Public Services and the National Minimum Wage. At least we were talking about public services having a future in 2000.

Y2K – 30 years of the Equal Pay Act!

Another year and news of more grim events around the world reached us. There was a massacre of 66 Palestinian Civilians and Regional Council proclaimed our solidarity with the Palestinian people and efforts to secure a final status agreement in accordance with the Oslo Agreement. Later in January 2001 we stood in silence in memory of our good friend Yousef Allen; to mark Holocaust Memorial Day; and also the terrible loss of lives in the Indian earthquake.

Regional Council heard presentations on organising standards and activist accreditation. We had an address by the Chair of the Health Care Service Group Exec on the National Plan for the NHS in England and a presentation on the Sefton Holocaust Memorial Project, and also one from strikers at Dudley Hospital faced with job losses and privatisation.

We were organising conferences against racism and privatisation, another Campaign for a Living Wage national event on 28 April 2001 and a big recruitment drive 20 Nov – 1 Dec 2000. A major task of cleansing the
UMR was underway. Meanwhile we agreed to look again at the budgets for Electricity and Gas branches following their merger into the Energy Service Group.

We condemned the pro-life group ‘Precious Life’ and its activities in harassing women at Pregnancy Advice Centres and restated our support for and commitment to a woman’s right to choose. We also supported a national demo in London in June 2001 in defence of asylum seekers called by the National Civil Rights Movement as a protest at the torrent of abuse aimed at asylum seekers in the national press.

And the year 2000 was also the 30th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act.

**Positively Public**

By February 2001 it was becoming clear that all our hopes, our aspirations, our expectations of what a Labour Government could do were under threat. Maybe we all expected too much on that May morning in 1997 but four years on our relationship with the party was under pressure.

A MORI poll had shown that 59% of our people thought Labour had lost touch with ‘ordinary working people’ – only 27% felt that way back in the happy days of 1997. UNISON’s National Affiliated Political Committee (NAPC) – Labour Link - was expressing real concerns about PFI, the Health Service, child and pensioner poverty – and of course the two-tier workforce. Gordon Brown (at that time Chancellor of the Exchequer) had said at the NAPC seminar that he would listen to UNISON’s concern and a detailed case against PFI was submitted to the Government.

By May 2001 some Labour Party ‘modernisers’ were saying that there should be no ‘no go’ areas for private sector involvement in public services and UNISON members in Dudley were on strike over local hospital services being contracted out.

In June UNISON launched its *Positively Public* Campaign with a Head Office unit co-ordinating region and branch activity and there was real pressure on the link with Labour.

In the North West we launched ORGANISE 2001 in Manchester on 29 March. It wasn’t a new approach but a return to fundamental trade union principles. This was a way of monitoring and checking the progress of our organising; a way to share good practice between branches and put branches at the centre of all the union’s activity.

In addition to the ORGANISE 2001 project, our union was trying to organise its complex set up in a more transparent way in 2001.
Seven years on from the merger and we had inherited an organisation with 1,227,000 members, 1,200 staff, 13 regions, about 1,300 branches (did anyone really know?), 4 self-organised groups and held 14 separate annual conferences. We also elected a National Executive Council (NEC) made up of regional seats, service group seats, additional seats – and expected the membership to know how we arrived at decisions!

A start had been made in the Strategic Review and attempts were being made to better define the roles of the union’s strategic centre, regions and branches. In 2001 we also initiated the annual objectives and priorities procedures.

This was about thinking through what UNISON was about, what was it for, where is it going? Michael Foot had defined this task in simple terms:

“We are not here to find elegant solutions, pregnant with initiative... no, we are here to provide for all those who are weaker and hungrier, more battered and crippled than ourselves. That is our only certain good and great purpose on earth... if you ask me about those insoluble economic problems that may arise if the top is deprived of their initiative, I would answer – to hell with them! The top is greedy and mean and will always find a way to take care of themselves. They always do”. He might not have been addressing UNISON’s strategic review when he said it but you get our drift.

If the private sector is the answer...

National Conference 2001 Brighton was Dave Prentis' first Conference as General Secretary following Rodney Bickerstaffe’s retirement in February.

Labour had been re-elected but Dave made it clear that he would continue to challenge the government where it thought that the private sector was the panacea and equated to efficiency and effectiveness. He said,

“Conference – if the private sector is the answer then someone has asked the wrong question!”

The union agreed to step up its fight against PFI but had to listen to Government Minister, Stephen Byers, telling us that the government had to consider the part the private sector could play in delivering services – “to rule out such consideration would allow political dogma to triumph”.

Some of us thought that, ‘to rule it in’ did just that!

Our region’s battle against racism and in particular the BNP in Oldham and other northern towns took centre stage at Conference with a report of our project with the local youth inclusion programme.
The region steps out

2001 saw Regional Council's only air-borne foray from this sceptred isle – we met at the Sefton Hotel in Douglas, Isle of Man in October 2001. Whether there was a mix up in the booking for the Douglas Hotel in Sefton we'll never know. We heard General Secretary Dave Prentis launch the Positively Public campaign, saw future Regional Secretary Frank Hont elected to the NEC and suffered an appalling storm on the Friday night. Thankfully David Beckham's sublime goal against Greece for England on Saturday afternoon prior to the flight back brightened the mood.

Reflections Robin Turton

20 years of UNISON – where have the years gone? Back in 1993 the Isle of Man had two NALGO branches – one in Health and one in Local Government – friendly but each going their own way.

Worries about the new super union to which both branches were now part were the same. How would we service members? Would we keep our identities? Would the level of support remain? Could we still be the same friendly family union now we were much bigger?

Well 20 years on I'm glad to report a very big 'yes' – all our fears were unfounded.

I became Branch Secretary of the Local Government branch in 1996 and later the merged Isle of Man National Branch. I have had much pleasure during the last 17 years to be part of the NW Regional Council. While being the smallest branch our views have always been listened to. These meetings have involved many hours of travel (I even attended one meeting in Preston and got home three days later – fog bound at Liverpool Airport) but the friendships and contacts made have been invaluable to the work of the branch.

One of the highlights of the last 20 years for me was when Regional Council came to the Isle of Man. The meeting was one of the best attended ever – even General Secretary Dave Prentis came along. I know many members enjoyed the weekend and I know the branch was very proud to host this event.

We have been very lucky with the support of all the regional and national staff we have had over the years who have ensured all our members received the best of support when they needed it.

As I retire as Branch Secretary this year I am proud to say I have been and remain a member of UNISON and I am sure that UNISON will remain a strong fighting membership-led union with one aim to make the whole world a better place for all working people.

I say roll on the next 20 years!

Robin Turton

But the storm clouds gathered. Regional Secretary Brian Devine became ill during the course of the year and the region had two caretaker managers – Cliff Williams and Nick Wright. Newly elected Convener Carole Horsfield suffered a devastating brain haemorrhage.
Reflections on Carole Horsfield

When Kevan Nelson stepped down as Regional Convenor in 2001, Carole was the obvious choice. She was one of the Deputy Regional Convenors, a really genuine, strong minded woman, who had successfully battled against breast cancer the year before.

I remember Carole being very reluctant to take on the role at first – It was that typical female thing of “I'm sure I can’t do it”, “I could never do it as well as Kev” etc. But once she made her decision she was, in true Carole style, determined to make it work. In 2001 I was elected as one of the two Deputy Regional Convenors; we all took up post in May. Our first meeting to plan the year ahead took place the following week. I don't think I have ever seen someone so organised and prepared for a meeting, she was really up for it and I remember thinking “we've got a good un er”.

At the beginning of June, Carole was tutoring on a new conference delegates’ course, at Arena Point when she suffered a massive brain haemorrhage. Someone so full of energy and enthusiasm was struck down in the cruelest of ways.

I still see Carole, who now lives in a nursing home in Burnley, she was 60 last year and a proud grandmother (well none of us are getting any younger). We often reminisce about the good old days in UNISON, the characters and the fashions; in fact we normally have a good old laugh about it. For me this sums up UNISON, the bonds we formed have lasted a lifetime, people we never previously knew are now good friends.

Lynne Morris

During the year Regional Council was occupied by the UMR – the replacement membership system; the publication (or not) of a branch secretaries’ directory; the transfer of CAFCAS members; and a Respect event in Oldham in September 2001. We also discussed further attacks on asylum seekers many of whom now faced voucher systems instead of emergency cash payments and detention without court authorisation (including 100 in Liverpool) – this under a Labour government! We discussed the position of global drug companies standing in the way of tackling disease in developing countries and supported the Oxfam Cut the Cost campaign calling for a reform of World Trade Organisation rules to allow developing countries to protect the public health interest of their people.

We also had an interesting discussion about disability, passing a motion calling for inclusion and civil rights for disabled people based on the social model of disability. In brief this says that people are excluded from society and their rights not because of their medical condition but because of the physical and social barriers and attitudes placed in their way.

Kevan Nelson departed as Regional Convenor to take up a full timer’s role in London and we awarded Life Membership to Rochdale’s Liz Murphy.

NHS takes centre stage

Our NHS was still at the centre of the national debate about the direction of the Labour Party – and more importantly the Labour
Government. UNISON continued to challenge statements from Health Secretary, Alan Milburn – statements such as, “Foundation Hospitals will have the freedom to move beyond the NHS” and “Failing hospitals can be run by the private sector”.

This debate was to run and run and a National Political Committee delegation met Tony Blair at Number 10 to raise these issues in June 2002. His response? “We have great difficulty measuring NHS delivery against ever rising expectations”. He even quoted Nye Bevan when talking about funding the NHS – “Priorities is the language of socialism”. Some members of the delegation thought it was a language Tony didn’t understand.

**It takes two to tango!**

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, John Reid, MP (remember him?) issued a challenge to 2002 National Conference, “We want unions to be serious players, so we expect then to be serious partners”. He cautioned against class war and asked for “serious engagement” from UNISON. Of course it takes two to tango!

At a fringe meeting Charles Clarke talked about the relationship between the Labour Party and trade unions and was told that our union was looking at the definition of ‘reform’ in the context of the Labour Government’s plans. They call it ‘necessary reform’ we call it wholesale reorganisation leading to privatisation and the slow death of public provision...

Big issues at Conference in 2002 were Palestine, privatisation, public services spending, pensions, PFI and for us in the North West – the decision to build a coalition against racism and convene a national TUC demonstration in Manchester in 2003.

One of the real lows of the year was the rise of the racist British National Party who had three councillors elected in Burnley. Meanwhile in Oldham the BNP had obtained 26% of the vote. Regional Council agreed that there was an urgent need for steps to combat racism and its root causes.

**Diane Kelly**

Another highlight for the region was undoubtedly the election of Diane Kelly as our Regional Convenor. Taking up the reins after Kevan Nelson can only be described as a tough act to follow! But what we can say is that Diane has performed the role brilliantly. A softer approach certainly. A more inclusive approach, perhaps. And a more fattening approach definitely judging by the amount of toffees and cakes she doles out to fellow activists at Conference! Under it all though is a dedicated trade unionist who has helped put our union and our region at the forefront of fighting for ‘our people’.
Community H.E.A.R.T. and the fight against racism

As ever there were both highs and lows in 2002-03. One of the brightest moments was hearing an address by Denis Goldberg on the work of Community H.E.A.R.T. (Health, Education, Reconstruction and Training) at Regional Council in Preston. Denis was one of the comrades imprisoned alongside Nelson Mandela in the fight against apartheid and is a long-time friend of the North West region.

Brian Devine

2002 held another tragedy for us when sadly, our well-liked and long-standing Regional Secretary, Brian Devine died after a long illness. Regional Council stood in silence in his memory.

Reflections on Brian Devine

Brian was UNISON’s first North West Regional Secretary in 1993 and prior to that he had led the NALGO staff team.

He chaired the North West TUC for many years and was a member of the long since defunct Regional Assembly.

A skilled and confident negotiator he was lead full timer in the merger discussions at regional level and saw the process through from start to finish.

Brian’s untimely death in May 2002 followed a long struggle with cancer and he died aged only 56.

He will always be remembered by those who knew him for his sense of humour, his detailed knowledge of the public services, his enthusiasm for our New Union and for his sure footed approach to the union’s work both internally and externally.

Hont appointed Regional Secretary

The cuts continued with £2m cuts proposed by Manchester Mental Health and Social Care Trust and the proposed closure of 35 of 48 elderly people’s homes and six children’s homes in Lancashire.

But we carried on doing what we do best. Our brand new Cumbria Resource Centre was up and running. We set up several Tackling Racism courses, contributed to the debate at the Earth Summit. The decision of Tony Blair’s government to ignore public feeling and go to war on the basis of a dodgy dossier reverberates to this day. In April 2002 the region hosted a national demonstration followed by a concert at the MEN Arena in support of a Living Wage – and 11 years on the fight continues.
At our meeting in January 2003 we marked the retirement of Frank Duffy (Manchester University) and congratulated Frank Hont on his appointment as Regional Secretary.

**Reflections Frank Hont**

Back in the heady days of merger talks those of us fully committed to the UNISON ‘idea’ talked a great deal about what the culture of the new union might be. Optimists suggested that the new union would bring together the best parts of the three partner unions – NALGO's internationalism, NUPE members' love of their union and COHSE's ability to concentrate on service group issues in health. Together we would speak for working people. Others were more cynical.

As an activist at branch and regional level for over 20 years before being elected to the NEC in 1998 I had concentrated on North West issues. At national level I soon learnt that each of the (then) 13 regions had its own particular view of the UNISON agenda. Scotland had its Parliament, Wales an Assembly and following on from the Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland was re-writing the constitutional framework. Even London had its GLC and a powerful Mayor. The North West? Almost 8 million citizens in our region – more than the combined population of Scotland and Wales – but no elected regional assembly for us.

But we did have our union and UNISON North West did speak up for working people and the unemployed; and take our case to Westminster; and stand in solidarity against the rising tide of racism. We didn't get devolution but we had our say and continue to do so. We speak for 200,000 members and their families – it's a big responsibility and an enormous privilege.

Frank Hont

**No War in Iraq!**

The new Regional Secretary set out new priorities – closer working between UNISON's regional managers and senior elected regional activists; follow up on branch development issues; a clearer, more robust media profile for the region and making anti-racist work a priority... and on 26 April 2003 we organised a national march and rally in Manchester followed by a concert. The BNP were on the march in the North West with 40 candidates ready to stand in local elections.


In March 2003 the war with Iraq began and ten years on the pain continues. In January our region had taken a position of total opposition to war – whether supported by the United Nations or not. We agreed to support the demonstration in London on 15 February 2003 and what a demo it was – some say two million people marched in the biggest demonstration this country had seen for generations.

Regional Government was debated ad nauseam in 2003 with UNISON North West supporting the idea of a devolution of powers to an elected Regional Assembly for the North West of England – population 7.5 million and more than the population of Scotland and Wales added together.
UNISON celebrated being 10 years old on 1 July 2003. A press statement from the national union said,

“UNISON has won more than £320m in compensation for members injured at work; helped 10,000 low paid members return to learn and operates a welfare scheme supporting more than 1,200 members and their families each year. The union was instrumental in winning a statutory National Minimum Wage and taking action against the two-tier workforce. UNISON continues to campaign in defence of the NHS and for decent pay”.

In the North West region we continued to prioritise anti-racist activity and support for branches. We took pride in campaigning to end racism, discrimination and poverty.

On Saturday, 30 August 2003 we supported the TUC Respect Festival in Platt Fields Park, Manchester. More than 15,000 people visited during the course of the day. In October 2003 our region also hosted a seminar – Challenging Racism. National speakers talked about developing a strategy for tackling racism in the workplace – activist and staff training; local anti-BNP campaigns; support for Searchlight; and co-ordinating trade union activity – all actions we went on to develop.

Four key objectives

At the end of 2003 UNISON’s NEC agreed that the union would have four key objectives:

• To recruit, organise and represent members
• To negotiate and bargain on behalf of members to promote equality
• To campaign and promote UNISON
• To develop an efficient and effective union

This was easy to say but much more difficult to do as the next ten years were to show. Our North West Regional Committee endorsed those objectives in December 2003 and from then on made valiant attempts to define and re-assess ‘priorities’ to match those objectives to the needs of almost 200,000 members in our region.

Reflections Rena Wood

UNISON has a very proud anti-racist history. To quote ex North West Regional Secretary, Frank Hont, “the fight against racism is a life-long struggle”. In UNISON we have continued that commitment from day one.

One of our many major campaigns started with mobilising for a national anti-racist rally in Manchester in 2003 under the banner of UNISON No Racism, No them and Us following the 2003 May local elections when the BNP got an alarming 101,333 votes. Our anti-racist campaigning became a high priority as the European elections were looming in the following year of June 2004 and Nick Griffin (the leader of the BNP) stepped up his campaign to become a Member of the European Parliament. The BNP didn’t make the gains they wanted in the May elections but the possibility they could gain in the Euro elections because of proportional representation was there for all to see.
Our campaign against the BNP included speaking on local, regional and national radio and our message was clear and simple – a message we took straight to our members. We produced publicity leaflets challenging the myths perpetuated by the racists and fascists with their politics of hate. We wrote to every member living in the wards where the BNP were standing explaining their politics of hate and encouraging them to vote on the basis that fighting racism was a basic Trade Union principle. We promoted anti-racist training courses for our activists to support them in challenging racism in the workplace as well as lobbying employers to ensure their practices were accountable, transparent and fair. We lobbied government to take the recommendations of the McPherson report forward.

Our anti-racist commitment is based on the basic principles of unity and solidarity. We recognised that of the votes cast for the BNP some would have been our own members. The BNP will always take full advantage of the situation fanned by the right wing press. The threat to community cohesion is there by scapegoating immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers as the reason for a lack of jobs and housing shortages. We know that the real cause is government policy with a lack of public investment and we called for a fairer and equitable distribution of wealth. The fight goes on.

Rena Wood

Foundation Hospitals and CASE Forms

A trip to the Lowry Centre in Salford in April 2003 was a new venue for Regional Council. We heard Dave Prentis give an address there. 104 North West branches had registered to attend 2003 National Conference – the highest level of attendance for many years.

This was the year the region introduced a new way of dealing with personal cases – and the CASE forms made their first appearance in January 2004.

The Labour Government wasn't all bad of course. It introduced new equalities legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and religion. And discussions continued around what form regional government might take.

Our anti-racism work continued with anti-BNP leafleting in Burnley, and Cumbria UNISON unveiling a plaque to commemorate the holocaust at Lake Windermere in January 2004 – 300 survivors of Auschwitz came to Cumbria in 1945.

Regional Council discussed the new Foundation Hospitals – a list of successful Trusts had been published by the Government even before these bodies were created by law! Over 500 members were involved in strike action at Knowsley Connexions service; payroll and HR had been outsourced to CAPITA in Cumbria and they were now looking at the construction unit and IT and there was a dispute over facility time at Bolton.

We submitted motions to Conference on Employment Rights and Organisation & Recruitment, continued to support part time members in a lengthy legal wrangle over pension entitlement, and even found time to take a position on whether there should be a second bridge over the Mersey.
Our Lesbian and Gay Self-Organised Group ran a stall over three days at the Europride event and we participated in an event in Liverpool to celebrate 100 years of the suffragette movement.

Life Memberships were issued to Keith Armer (Hyndburn), Frank Duffy (Manchester MMU), Glenys Butterworth (Oldham LG) and Colette Bartello (Warrington LG).

2004 Campaigning for a third term

Even with all our reservations UNISON campaigned for a third Labour government in 2004. Adverts were placed in all Labour Party publications making it clear where we stood.

UNISON wanted a manifesto for world class public services. We wanted the whole team to work for the public good, not driven by market values, but by Labour values.

- Public services not privatisation
- Fair employment contracts
- An end to child poverty
- Closing the gender pay gap
- Lifelong learning opportunities
- A minimum wage for 16/17 year olds

The region brought all North West Branch Secretaries together on 20 January 2004 for a seminar, “The Ten Year Challenge”. We discussed the recruitment challenge and launched a ‘tool kit’ to assist branches with a membership drive.

Equal Pay – the long and winding road

The equal pay/single status issue was becoming more and more important in 2004 as it became clear that only 20% of local authorities had carried out their evaluation reviews. Our long battle with Stefan Cross and other no-win no-fee lawyers began.

Our anti-racist work remained a priority and the region hosted a major seminar in February at The Lowry, Salford Quays – Creating Cohesion - Reversing Racism. We also backed the Sefton Holocaust Project film ‘AREK’ premiered at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall in June. In May we celebrated our involvement with the Oldham Youth Inclusion project and the launch of their book ‘Cuba Innit’. And we sponsored a Blackpool tram with all-over advertising and anti-racism messages inside.

At the end of June 2004 UNISON won a landmark legal battle for compensation when 29 cleaners and catering staff received payments ranging from £1,044 to £22,616 after a six year fight. The members – some of whom had worked at Walton Hospital for 25 years – lost their jobs in a transfer of responsibilities to Fazakerly Hospital. The new contractor
had advertised their jobs on worse pay and conditions. Sadly, two of our members had died waiting for justice.

2004 was the year of ‘wellness polarisation’, as the healthy got healthier and the sick got sicker.

**Liverpool Children’s Services Dispute**

The Liverpool Children’s Services dispute became one of our most difficult and long running battles that year. More than 100 staff walked out in the week commencing 23 August 2004 in a dispute about changes to working patterns. UNISON was dealing with an aggressive Chief Executive who threatened ‘sequestration’ of union assets over alleged secondary picketing. On 5 October, six weeks into the strike, the NEC Industrial Action Committee decided that this, “was not a national dispute and that full take home pay would not be paid”.

They did put £50,000 into a Hardship Fund – and more from their meetings in October and December as the dispute stretched on. The region and branch then spent two full days at ACAS trying to arrive at a settlement and on 16 December 2004 an agreement to return to work was put to the members. On 21 December the NEC Industrial Action Committee confirmed that the dispute was over and congratulated the strikers on their determination and solidarity during four long months of action.

On 20 December 2004 it was announced that there would be three candidates for the General Secretary Election in 2005: Roger Bannister; Dave Prentis and Jon Rogers. The ballot ran until 28 February 2005.

**Hope Not Hate**

The local and European elections of 10 June 2004 became a major focus for the region. 50,000 leaflets were sent direct to members in key target areas while around 300,000 Searchlight newspapers were delivered in Burnley, Blackburn, Pendle, Wigan, Oldham, Merseyside and Manchester. We took out Hope not Hate advertising on buses and through all the work managed to stop the BNP being elected to Europe.

**Agenda for Change**

2004 was also the year of Agenda for Change. An important conference on 7 October 2004 was followed by a ballot of the Health membership. On a 26.8% turn-out the result was:

- **YES** 92,391 (75.2%)
- **NO** 30,439 (24.8%)
Regional Government

Regional Council talked about Regional Assemblies and the postponed referenda; the closure of the Jaguar Plant in Coventry; a second Political Fund ballot (in early 2005); a TUC Day of Action around Pensions and organisation around the 23 March date for Industrial Action after the successful ballot. There was also support for the campaign to reinstate funding for the expansion of Manchester’s Metrolink tram system. And over 10 years after our formation the merger of the Isle of Man branches was finally completed!

Our international work continued. We heard a statement on Mordachai Vanunu about the difficulties he still faced following his release from 18 years of solitary confinement by the Israeli government for telling the world what it knew already - that Israel had nuclear weapons.

We supported ‘Fighting Sweatshops Promoting Fair Trade’, ‘No Sweat’, ‘Ethical Threads’ and ‘Labour Behind the Label’ all of which pointed the finger at global firms paying foreign workers a pittance for making high priced designer goods – something back in the news this year with the tragic collapse of the Bangladeshi garment factory. In February 2005 we heard a detailed description of the process of the recent elections in Palestine by Bill Gilby National Officer.

Regional Council gave life Membership to John Davey (Hyndburn LG) and Derek Jenkins (Wirral) and thanked the departing vice chair of the Local Government Service Group, Mo Baines who was moving on to pastures new.

Pensions and Equal pay – it never rains but it pours!

Pensions and Equal Pay emerged as our two big challenges in 2005.

Carlisle suffered major flooding after it rained constantly over Friday and Saturday the 7th and 8th January. The floods left 13,000 homes without electricity and the civic centre a complete wash out. As ever UNISON members came into their own in this crisis and worked tirelessly to provide essential public services – especially during the very difficult first 36 hours of the flooding.

North West UNISON engaged with Blackburn with Darwen Council to promote its community cohesion project ‘We all belong in Blackburn’ with the rise of BNP in our region UNISON recognised how important it was to engage with community work on anti-racist initiatives.

We saw this as a trade union issue

• To tackle inequality and open up opportunities for all citizens.
• To build an inclusive sense of citizenship
• To eradicate racism and extremism
AREK Hersh entered his first camp when he was just ten years old. Thus started a five year ordeal that would take him as a child, alone and grieving for a family perished at Chelmno in the first “Gas Van”, across a war torn Poland. On roads that would eventually lead him through two of the most notorious of Hitler’s “Death Camps”.

The film follows the return of the man AREK Hersh to the places of his childhood “where murder was a way of life”. It follows his incredible story from the streets of the Lodz ghetto to the wire fences of Auschwitz and Birkenau.

This award winning film AREK is his story.

WELCOME FROM DAVE PRENTIS, UNISON’S GENERAL SECRETARY

Welcome to this International Premiere of ‘AREK’ - a film funded by UNISON working in partnership with Sefton Holocaust Memorial Project.

This Film is an integral part of UNISON’s work in opposing racism and defending human rights.

The premiere takes place at an important time. A time when racists shriek about Britain being swamped by asylum seekers when in fact we take a tiny proportion of the world’s refugees. Organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees reveal the true picture - 85% experience hunger, 95% struggle to buy clothes or shoes and 80% are not able to maintain good health.

AREK’s story is timeless and demands that we stand up to the racists and the hysterical media. We have to speak up for respect, for dignity, for diversity and the right of all people to be free from fear and humiliation.

It’s an old trade union slogan but so relevant for the times we live in, ”an injury to one is an injury to all”.

Dave Prentis
and recognised this was a lifetime’s work. No easy fixes, no simple solutions – just hard work.

As part of our anti-racist work we supported the production and distribution of the film ‘AREK’ and performances of the play ‘DENIAL’ – including two performances at National Delegate Conference in Glasgow.

In February UNISON balloted nearly 800,000 local government workers over strike action against changes to their pension scheme. Work longer, pay more, get less was the direct campaign message. More than 105,000 of those members were in the North West. There was a 70% vote for action – but the strike planned for 23 March 2005 was called off following an eleventh hour agreement.

It was a year of ballots. In March Dave Prentis polled 75% of the vote to remain as General Secretary – he won 184,769 votes compared with 41,406 for Roger Bannister and 18,306 for Jon Rogers. UNISON members also voted overwhelmingly to retain the union’s political fund with 85% of those voting saying YES to the fund. Oh, and there was a General Election on 5 May.

In April our Region held a reception to celebrate the achievements of COMMUNITY HEART special guest Denis Goldberg was joined by Zelmys Dominguez from the Cuban Embassy and a representative of the South African High Commission.

Reflections Community H.E.A.R.T.

UNISON North West Region has been a long-standing friend of Community H.E.A.R.T. The friendship started way back in 1996 at national delegate conference in Bournemouth. I was a UNISON activist in Scotland but had met this inspiring man, Denis Goldberg, in 1994 about seven months before he set up Community H.E.A.R.T. It became my mission to spread the word about Denis (one of those sentenced to life alongside Nelson Mandela) and Community H.E.A.R.T. – the charity he set up to overcome the legacy of apartheid. It wasn’t that hard to be honest. I introduced Denis to the UNISON Manchester Branch who were won over immediately by Denis who spoke of the wonder of his people winning their freedom but also the awful legacy that apartheid had left behind.

Manchester Branch and the North West Region were looking for ways to support Community H.E.A.R.T. and by the autumn of 1997 had agreement from the Greater Manchester local authorities and UNISON to support the Book and 10 Pence campaign. By January 1998 I was working for Community H.E.A.R.T. to promote the campaign in the North West. Office space was freely given by the Manchester Branch and branches all over the North West got involved in the campaign.

The support continued and so did the Community H.E.A.R.T. presence in the North West. In July 1998 the region hosted the South African High Commissioner, H E Cheryl Carolus, probably the first time a trade union hosted a South African diplomat. In 2002, when Denis returned to South Africa, Community H.E.A.R.T. moved the whole organisation to Manchester which I think reflects
the support given to the organisation by branches, the Region and activists, both lay and employed. I
will always be grateful to the Region for their support for Community H.E.A.R.T. and our work to
overcome the legacy of apartheid. The work continues as the first North West delegation to South
Africa visited our sister trade unions and Community H.E.A.R.T. projects this year, seeing first-
hand the legacy and the work we still need to do.

Isobel McVicar

Lifelong UNISON member Mo Mowlem died on 19th August 2005. She
was one of us and her commitment to equality, human rights and peace was
there for all to see.

The long road to equal pay had stalled and despite 30 years of equal pay
legislation in the UK the pay gap between men and women persisted.
UNISON action to address this stepped up a gear in 2005 when we began
to take on the so called ‘no win no fee’ vultures.

In May six of our lay officials in Sefton Branch were suspended after
an incident in the Strand Shopping Centre during a campaign against
housing stock transfer. More than 2,000 Sefton Council members were
balloted for strike action in defence of our members and a YES vote
resulted in strike action and a long running dispute over victimisation after
Nigel Flanagan and Paul Summers were dismissed in the November. The
resolution was described by one steward as “Progress not perfection”.

On 13 June 600 cleaners, catering and laundry staff employed by
INITIAL at Aintree Hospital, Liverpool were on strike in a dispute over
pay and conditions.

On 5 December our region held a reception for Olga Salanueva and her
daughter to highlight the plight of her husband Rene Gonzales and four
compatriots who were imprisoned in the US. We continue our support for
the release of the Miami 5.

David Cameron became leader of the Tory Party.

A woman’s place...

In 2005 the annual conference took place in Glasgow for the first time
– an interesting week in a vibrant city. Our motion to Conference was
called ‘A Woman's Place’ and looked at how the union could enable greater
participation of women. The motion tried to build on The Transformations
Project – a piece of work commissioned by the North West and Northern
Ireland regions from Liverpool University which looked at the overlap of
union activity, working life, community identity and home life. All aimed at
assisting women to get more involved in UNISON activity

2005-06 saw the first implementation of Agenda for Change through the
NHS – a massive piece of work to ensure that NHS pay and conditions
were ‘equality-proofed’.
We created the North West Organising Awards where branches competed in various categories including Communicating & Organising, Organising & Recruitment, Organising for Learning, Member Participation and Negotiation & Representation. The Regional Pool was also in place where branches could bid for funding to carry out projects to boost recruitment and retention.

We ran a campaign against 2000 job losses in the gas industry where data processing was being offshored to India under the tag line “doing the wrong thing” a skit on British Gas’ adverts of the time “doing the right thing”.

And there were more personal tragedies. Former Regional Treasurer, Chris Dunford passed away, and a minute’s silence was also held in respect for the terrible loss of life in the East Asian earthquake. On 29 July 2005 Anthony Walker was murdered by a racist in Huyton. No one could possibly forget the dignity of the Walker family in that awful time for them and indeed for all of us.

**Reflections Anne McCormack on Colombia**

In 2005 I was part of a multi-union delegation to Colombia to see at first hand the threats and challenges to trade unionists in Colombia.

The visit started off at the Conference on Human Rights in Bogota where we met academics, trade unionists, community activists, students and other, non-organised workers such as recycling workers who toiled for their existence on the rubbish tips of the capital.

We had been invited by the CUT, the Colombian Trade Union Congress, and, as such, we were deemed to be at risk of violence so had our own bodyguards. We were driven around in armour-plated vehicles and you’ve never lived until you’ve been thrown around in the back of these cars with an Uzi sub machine gun rattling ’round your ankles.

We visited the offices of the CUT going through airport-like security with metal detectors and bullet proof glass. We met with the leader of the Oil Workers’ union who was under house arrest. We were photographed entering his home by the armed police who were permanently stationed outside. He was recovering from cancer treatment which was why he was under house arrest and not in prison. His health was precarious but his courage was undimmed.

We also went to Medellin and Cali, both major centres for the world’s drug and murder trades.

Medellin was very pretty and we went up into the mountains, supposedly under paramilitary control, to visit a primary school. The ride up in a taxi was surreal, we were told it was extremely dangerous, yet taxis went there at will. The views were stupendous and the area was very quiet and peaceful. As everywhere, the children were delightful, wanting to shake hands and say hello. The poverty was very evident and the school staff explained the problems - the poverty and hunger of the children who couldn’t afford school dinners and lack of resources.

Cali was our next stop and we met with public sector workers there who were fighting to defend the public water supply from privatisation. While we were there Claudia, the office worker had been arrested for going too close to a military area and she was imprisoned in the Women’s prison in Cali. We went to visit her and heard horrific stories from the women there of officially sanctioned rape
and beatings. No charges had been brought against many of the women, including Claudia, but that didn't seem to matter. We were given an 'audience' with the prison governor, a man who we were told was one of the worst perpetrators against the women. It was difficult to speak to him knowing what he did yet he seemed so plausible and urbane. Frightening.

Back in Bogota we took part in the May Day march, under the watchful eyes and trained guns of the police, yet such was the courage of the marchers that they sang and marched with great cheerfulness and were applauded along the way by thousands of spectators.

Wherever I’ve been on behalf of our union visiting our sisters and brothers in the labour movement across the world, I am always struck by the warmth and welcome I receive. We are truly a global movement and I feel humbled by the courage that my comrades show in the face of such vicious oppression.

Anne McCormack

2006 Pensions Strike!

In February and March detailed planning started for Industrial action over pensions with a simple message for UNISON Local Government members—“Defend Your Pension”. The ballot result was announced on 15 March: 79.67% voted YES to industrial action.

The North West was in the front line and determined to deliver with Branch Secretaries coming to Arena Point for advice and guidance from senior elected members. We decided on a hard line on exemptions and held to that line on the day of action on 28 March 2006. Negotiations trundled on.

North West UNISON put an enormous effort in to opposing the far right in the May local elections. Working with NWTUC and other affiliates our region led the way in fronting out the BNP in Burnley, Pendle, Oldham, Blackburn, Tameside and Wigan. Wherever they stood we opposed them. We also worked with comrades from the German Trade Union Ver.di where their North Rhein Westphalia region was suffering a similar upsurge in far-right activity. A strong link was built with Ver.di comrades in the Dusseldorf area and a group visited our region for talks in October.

Work on equal pay increased as no win no fee lawyers plied their profitable trade. They tried to take credit for trade union success as in Cumbria where the equal pay victory was due to UNISON and the GMB. In Cumbria alone our two unions took 2,650 of 3,000 cases lodged – lawyer Stefan Cross was responsible for just 35 of them.

Pensions, Defending the NHS and Equal Pay dominated our year and in October all North West branches were at the City of Manchester Stadium for a regional seminar to discuss the challenges we faced.

In September our members in the award winning NHS logistics service voted to strike against government plans to sell their service to German parcel company DHL. Our 200 Runcorn members were to be in the thick of it.
Reflections Diane Kelly

When I became Regional Convenor for the largest region in UNISON I knew it was a big responsibility. To represent almost 200,000 members I had to have a great team working with me and a partnership with our full time organisers that would stand up to any challenge that our members would face.

I knew a lot of activists from my involvement on steward training courses and from my election in 2002 I had made it a priority to get to know the branches.

The regional staff were supported by a strong management team so we were well prepared for what I consider was one of our major successes in the 20 years of UNISON. The 2006 Pensions Strike.

We were disciplined and wanted no exemptions. Branches and the region united to make sure we had closure of public serves across the region. We wanted the North West to lead the dispute.

The 24 hour strike started at midnight and yes the Mersey Tunnels were closed and it was national news. From dawn picket lines formed and leafleting of train and bus stations commenced. The public had to be won over to our side; we had to stop this attack on our members. Our activists and members were on the radio, in television studios and in the papers. It was a magnificent show of solidarity and it made me so proud to be the Regional Convenor that day.

It was a true partnership working with everyone involved – even members in other service groups who were not on strike stood alongside us on that day. Our region had led the way.

Diane Kelly
Regional Convenor

Our Meet Your Neighbours project in Blackburn went from strength to strength
Labour comes to Manchester

The Labour Party Conference came to Manchester in September 2006 and North West UNISON made its presence felt. We hosted the Guardian Debate at Arena Point chaired by Jackie Ashley; organised a fringe meeting in the Town Hall ‘Combating Racism in Europe’ chaired by Claude Moraes MEP and a Latin American evening in Arena with speakers from Cuba, Colombia and Venezuela.

We also hosted a fringe meeting ‘Fighting back against the BNP’ with Jon Cruddas, Nick Lowles (Searchlight) and local MP Hazel Blears. In the Labour Party Conference itself delegates voted for a UNISON motion condemning the Labour Government for its “breakneck speed of change” in the NHS.

Operation Banana, NHS Together, Keep Our NHS Working

It was a year when the NHS took centre stage. The privatisation and marketisation of the NHS was gathering pace. We agreed to support the Keep Our NHS Working campaign to promote five healthier options for the NHS. In May 2006 there was a joint lobby in London against NHS cuts and redundancies followed by an NHS Day of Action on 3 March 2007 with another rally in London. The TUC launched ‘NHS Together’ a new broad campaign and there was a major march and rally on 3 November 2007 in London. In the North West we ran Operation Banana – you must be bananas to cut the NHS – very effective and supported health branches such as NHS Logistics who took lawful industrial action to protect jobs. We battled against the outsourcing of the Prescription Pricing Division fought cuts in Mental Health Services in Manchester and much more.

Elsewhere massive cuts to staffing and funding in the FE sector were proposed and the merger of police forces was continuing apace.

Quite a bit of internal restructuring was going on with the separate Electricity and Gas Service Groups merging to become Energy; and Water becoming Water and Environment. The Affiliated Political Fund was renamed Labour Link – although links with (New) Labour were going through a bit of a difficult patch at the time.

We had some interesting guest speakers during the year including Wateraid and former senior activist Denis Maginn who gave an illuminating talk about the Working Class Movement Library in Salford. It’s still going strong and if you’ve never been a visit is essential.
Reflections Maureen Le Marinel

After being discharged from the Army for being gay in 1983, I took a job in Lancashire Constabulary’s control room in 1984 and on the advice of my mum joined the union - something I would never have thought of doing. All they ever did was go on strike - so what could they do for me? But I was soon to find out. Following my six-month probationary period I ‘came out’ at work and was targeted for bullying by senior members of the force. This experience is why and how I became involved in Trade Unionism and when my long-term commitment to our great union began. My route took me into Self-Organisation - a great way to get involved and get used to the ‘union way of working’. Self-Organisation is the bed rock of our union, it is where many of our great activists past and present began and were our future lies. We need to encourage, mentor and bring these members along to ensure we continue to be a union for all with fairness and equality at its core.

I was an assistant branch secretary for about ten years, and when Lancashire Police’s own branch was founded in 2006, I became its Branch Secretary. I joined the National Executive Council, the union’s highest lay body, in 2003.

For the last two years I have been one of UNISON’s National Vice Presidents. Without the support of my branch, region, service group, employer and family I would not have reached such a position. To have colleagues and peers have a belief in me that I could achieve such a role is very humbling and I hope that if elected to the role of President at the end of our National Delegate Conference in Liverpool that I can give something back to everyone. I want to be able to inspire those who want to become involved but think that they can't. My message to you is that you must first believe in yourself. How can you expect others to believe in you if you don’t? Never think that you are on your own, there are many, many members, activists and staff that are there to help you. You just need ask and never be scared of asking – the help will be there. Have a goal and a plan. Never change it but you may deviate from on occasion you never know what life will throw at you, but always go back to and be what you want to be.

Maureen Le Marinel


L Morris crossed the floor and was appointed Regional Manager in June 2006. Paul Summers was sacked by Sefton during their housing dispute was later reinstated and finally appointed as a regional officer in UNISON’s Northern Region.

UNISON National Black Members’ Conference was held in Liverpool in January 2007 and we produced a North West newsletter for all delegates attending – the general consensus being it was a successful and well organised conference.

Migrant Workers North West (MWNW) stepped up a gear in February with a conference held in the Reebok Stadium, Bolton. Ian McCartney, MP, attended and described MWNW as “a beacon of good practice”. A beacon made real thanks to the then Regional Secretary of TGWU, Dave McCall.
Equal pay (continued!)

The equal pay battle intensified in 2007 and on 16 February first shots were fired in the Bury Council saga when Branch Secretary, Steve Morton, said, “I intend to write to all members inviting them to consider whether they have a claim – we are concerned about the financial impact on the council but we have to act on behalf of our members.”

Mass litigation was being threatened in councils all over the country and close co-operation between full time staff and elected officials was essential in this battle. Against a confused background UNISON tried to develop a formula for equal pay for all public sector employees. Our goal was to develop pay and grading structures that were fair to all workers and protect the vital services that the public rely on. They were tough and difficult negotiations which many in the media did not fully understand. Forget no win no fee solicitors – without the unions the battle for pay justice would never have even got started. Our victory in Cumbria in November was a particularly good day for 1,500 low paid women members.

The BNP threat was ever present in local elections. In 2000 the BNP had put forward 17 candidates and gained 8% of the vote but no seats. On the other hand in 2006 they fielded 363 candidates (53 in the North West), won 19% of the vote and won 32 more seats taking the total number of BNP councillors in 2006 to 48.

After the 2007 elections the BNP share of the vote fell to under 15% but we still had four BNP Councillors in Burnley where they took more than 25% of the vote. More work needed to be done.

Blair Out!

In March UNISON held a special conference in London on Local Government Pensions and negotiations trundled on… and in May Tony Blair retired after 10 years. The two were not connected but our union had parted company with Blair on a number of issues – especially Iraq and its tragic consequences.

For many in the North West, the endless reforms, pointless re-organisations and the intrusion of private contractors and management consultants across our public services had been equally dispiriting.

UNISON backed Gordon Brown for leader and Alan Johnson for deputy only for Alan to be beaten by the smallest of margins (50.43% to 49.56%) in the final run off by Harriet Harman.

The members did eventually back the new agreement on local government pensions with 97% voting ‘Yes’ after three years of difficult negotiations, lobbying and industrial action.
Karen Reissmann was suspended by her employer (Manchester Mental Health) in June 2007 which led to a bitter industrial dispute as a result of Karen's dismissal. A demonstration in her support was well attended in November and a final return to work agreement was signed off on 13 December 2007. There was an out of court settlement at the Employment Tribunal and Karen eventually managed to obtain another job within the NHS some two years later.

North West Black Members’ Committee organised an important one day seminar in Manchester Town Hall on 10 October 2007 to acknowledge the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Speakers included Kofi Klu, Khi Rafe and Dr Lez Henry.

**Local Government Reorganisation**

2007 saw some notable victories and disputes memorable for other reasons. Sefton Health branch was congratulated on getting Initial Hospital Services to agree to Agenda for Change terms and conditions, as were South Manchester Health branch where a ballot of members employed by Sodexho came out 300 to 5 in favour of a strike ballot. The vote led to Sodexho changing its mind. An NHS Demonstration in Manchester was supported.

In Local Government reorganisation was afoot with Cumbria becoming a unitary authority at the expense of six district councils, while discussions began about the future shape of Cheshire which eventually led to the sad demise of Cheshire County Council and its six borough councils.

We had disputes in Bolton over changes to terms and conditions in Learning Disabilities, Children's and Older People's services and the year also saw major cuts to the Probation Service.

There were calls to try and co-ordinate action in health and local government over pay claims. We submitted a motion to Conference on Gun and Knife Crime. Our NW Education team introduced the excellent ‘One Step Ahead’ Training Programme.

Our meeting in February 2008 took us to the grand surroundings of Manchester’s Bridgewater Hall where our twinning with the Matanzas Cuba Region was reaffirmed and the 10th year of the arrangement celebrated.

**Merger what merger?**

Talk of a GMB/UNISON merger was in the air as senior elected officials from the two unions met in April... talk that continues to come to nothing five years on. In the North West we did meet with comrades from the GMB in June and again in September 2008 to ‘explore’ common ground but the prospect of full merger seemed a long way off.
Ragged Trousered Philanthropists

Liverpool was the European Capital of Culture in 2008 and after some initial reservations our union and the North West TUC organised several events to celebrate the trade union contribution to civil society – a ‘Radical Route’ heritage trail; public library readings from ‘The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists’; a young person’s photography competition; and performances of Tayo Aluko’s play about the life of Paul Robeson.

Pay was the number one bargaining priority in 2008 with UNISON submitting its 40,000th equal pay claim on International Women’s Day in March. The Local Government employers had made a derisory 2.2% pay offer and our differences with the Labour Government were increasing – on low pay, tax, rising prices – we didn’t just want them to listen we wanted them to act. All leading up to a ballot for industrial action and our pay strike on 16 and 17 July 2008 which illustrated the loyalty of our North West membership to their union. A display of solid, determined and disciplined industrial action.

How much is that HQ?

No history of the region would be complete without reference to Stockport’s Mark Rayner and his dogged pursuit of the truth over the costs and programme for building the new London HQ. In 2007 the project had a budget of £64million. This rose first to £70m in 2008 and by October 2008 the estimate was £72.5m. It was expected to be completed by July 2010 and finally opened on 18 April 2011. Not bad when you think about the last builder you had in!

Long-standing NEC member Mike Folliard stood down, former activist Wendy Simon was elected to Liverpool City Council and we held a minute’s silence for Alban Bamber, Chris Welch, and Jim Carlson.
Palestine

On 30 December 2008 UNISON called for an immediate end to the Israeli military action in Gaza that had resulted in hundreds of Palestinian civilian deaths and casualties.

We condemned the rocket attacks by Hamas on civilian targets but argued that the bombing of Gaza was a completely disproportionate response.

Our union made a £10,000 donation to Medical Aid for Palestine – not the first donation and sadly not the last.

Bankers!

In 2008 there was the minor matter of a near meltdown of the world’s financial markets leading to governments around the globe pouring billions of pounds, dollars and euros in life support to banks ‘too big to go bust’. Irresponsible under-regulated and unsustainable financial institutions protected by the state and for which we suffer to this day.

2008 was the 60th year of the NHS and we held an event at Trafford General Hospital – the first hospital to be opened under the NHS in 1948. Our NHS campaigning continued with a demonstration about the Royal Liverpool Hospital PFI scheme.

It was the year June Poole and Ann McAleer collected hotel toiletries from Conference hotels…for Women’s Aid. We were involved with Blackburn with Darwen, North Manchester Boys’ school, a Jewish school and a Liverpool School in a community cohesion project to break down barriers.

Columbian delegates visited the region. It was the tenth anniversary of the Miami Five injustices. A hurricane in Cuba had destroyed the union office in Matanzas and we agreed to raise funds to rebuild it.

October 2008 saw the regional publicity committee dragging itself into the brave ‘new’ world of the internet when our regional website went live. In 2009 we first started doing joint branch assessments. Our motions to conference were on the economic crisis and on child poverty.

Stand and deliver: Your pay rise or your job

Equal pay continued to be one of the big issues in 2009 with UNISON and particularly the North West Region putting enormous effort into litigation, negotiations and educating members and the media.

As job security became a pressing issue for members pay negotiations were being pushed into the background – “pay in a cold climate”. Your pay rise or your job. Larry Elliot of the Guardian described the financial crisis as having five phases:
1. The ‘bubble’ roars ahead
2. The ‘bubble’ ends but we remain in denial
3. We capitulate e.g. Northern Rock is nationalised
4. Panic – ‘desperate times call for desperate measures’
5. Recovery

The only problem with that analysis is that four years later we are still waiting for the recovery! Workers remain in the ‘free market lock box’ where wages are kept down, employment rights are reduced and health and safety is seen as just so much red tape getting in the way of the free market.

Regional Council was held in Liverpool Town Hall in February 2009 and on the way to that meeting Bernadette Gallagher and Florence Hill from Bolton branch were hit by a car. Both were taken to hospital by ambulance and Florence suffered serious injuries. Thankfully both eventually recovered.

The North West Euro election results were announced on 8 June 2009 and it was a blow to read that Nick Griffin had been elected for the BNP. UNISON North West put a tremendous amount of work in with Searchlight in the ‘Hope Not Hate campaign’ and it was hard to take that we now had a BNP MEP in our region. We ran a considered, targeted, purposeful campaign against the BNP based on experience built up over six years from 2002 when they first broke through in our region – and Griffin still got in.

Getting tough with Labour

At National Delegate Conference in Bournemouth, UNISON finally got tough with Labour. Dave Prentis called for the suspension of Constituency Development Plan funding, only supporting Labour MPs who supported UNISON values and demanded that we have a say in the manifesto for the next General Election. The Conference endorsed plans for the reorganisation of our service groups – a restructuring of our internal organisation that many felt was long overdue.

TUC in Liverpool

The TUC came to Liverpool in September and our region funded a performance of ‘Call Mr Robeson’ for delegates at the Black-E Theatre. Our Regional Secretary, and Gloria Mills from UNISON Centre spoke at a fringe meeting organised to promote the work of the Stephen Lawrence Trust. This was the first time Congress had been in Liverpool since 1906! Let’s hope they don’t leave it 103 years till the next one.

There was much talk about ‘Meeting the Organising Challenge’ this year with the union determined to use every available tool in building UNISON as a sustainable organisation. Joint Branch Assessments were one such tool with regional organising staff working with branch officers to deliver a more structured approach to recruitment, local negotiations and campaigning. All at a time when branches were under severe pressure to represent individuals and groups of members locally.
Negotiations can be ‘lengthy’ and our region knew all about this with the Cumbria equal pay saga. Seven long years of UNISON pursuing the Council for fairness for our women members. Diligently pursued by staff working with the Cumbria County Branch led to a £39 million pay out of back-pay. A long road to justice and recognition for our members.

Cuts, cuts and more cuts was the mantra from politicians of all parties but when they cut it’s our members who bleed.

Reflections Cumbria 2009 Floods

On the run up to the 2009 Cumbria Floods I was the on-call Flood Warning Duty Officer. We had had a very wet autumn and my duty week was no different, numerous rain and river gauges had triggered during the week with a number of Flood Alerts being issued. Keswick Campsite had flooded and had been evacuated. As the new week started we all could see the forecast was not looking good and my heart was sinking at the thought it could be as bad as 2005. The amount of work/stress/turmoil those floods had caused was enormous, and I knew how this would impact on so many people around the county if it happened again. We had however put a lot of time and effort into training, exercising our staff and working with communities, so we were more prepared than in 2005.

On the Tuesday and Wednesday we worked hard to make the emergency responders and communities we work with aware of the potential bad weather. On the Thursday, as things were getting worse I worked with the Police to identify key sites which may be at risk. I also helped to communicate the risks to the control centre. By early evening we were telling them that even though Keswick and Cockermouth were already under water, the rivers were going to rise at least another metre. There is no easy way to break this news and the looks on some of the attendees faces were of shock and horror.

On the Friday I arrived for my second shift, to the news that a police officer had been washed away as a bridge collapsed. My cousin and her partner both work as police officers in West Cumbria and I feared it could be Richard who had been washed away. By mid morning it was confirmed who the officer was, and I was relieved to find out it was not him. At the end of my shift I spoke to my mum, who informed that my cousin was on one side of the bridge and Richard was on the other, a close call for both of them.

Because of the training done since 2005 Keswick was evacuated much sooner than before with no emergency rescues having to be carried out. Cockermouth residents, even though flooded beyond anything they had seen before, praised us for all our hard work keeping them informed, and there was little negative press.

Because of my involvement during the height of the flood and my role working with the Police, I was asked to give evidence at the inquest into PC Bill Barker’s death. Working with others in the Environment Agency I pulled together a statement outlining what the weather was like, how this affected the rivers with the amount of rain that fell, the impacts from the floods and how this related to past floods. Giving evidence in court was one of the hardest things I have done for the Environment Agency, but from listening to the other witnesses I now know a lot more about bridge and reservoir construction!

Diane Jackson
Going Underground

October 2009 and a rare trip up the M6 took Regional Council to the Rheged Centre in Penrith. The only time we’ve met underground.

It was the year of the NW TUC’s Proud to Serve the Public Campaign and the Leeds bin dispute. It was the year the EDL raised its ugly racist head. Regional Council agreed that BNP membership was incompatible with being a member of UNISON but the rule change to expel racists failed to get the required majority at the 2009 Conference.

We welcomed Cumbria Health and Morecambe Bay Health Branches to their first NW Regional Council – on a free transfer from the Northern Region.

As ever the infantry on the ground was in the firing line with facilities halved in Lancashire since the Tories took over the council in May 2009 and work-time union meetings were banned by Manchester Metropolitan University as redundancies were pushed through. An estimated 7,000 further jobs were to go in FE in the region.

Recruitment initiatives were also more in the news. 25,000 members had joined on-line since the facility was established, and there were successful outcomes from the Three Companies Recruitment Campaign and the NW School Staff Project.

Regional Council in February 2010 again nominated Dave Prentis for the position of General Secretary. There was a New Service Group Structures Working Party.

Our NHS Our Future

Dave Prentis was re-elected as General Secretary. We set up a new Community Service Group, agreed the Democracy in UNISON Guidelines, and campaigned in the Our NHS Our Future Campaign. The membership system had begun to be passed down to branches and 90% of them were now on the system.

The Publicity Committee under Ashley Bramwell set up its popular Branch Communication Officers Network events for branch publicity officers and HQ ran a month long TV advertising campaign.

Regional Council at the Merseyside Maritime Museum heard National President Gerry Gallagher talk about his presidential charity support for the ‘Not a Silent Witness’ campaign. It was shocking to realise that one in four people experience domestic violence at some stage of their lives and horrendous to think that two people die every week in the UK as a result of domestic violence.
Reflections Steve Cook: Roads to nowhere

Beyond the new union’s main areas of organisation there were a number of less obvious sectors in which the union would have significant influence, and one of these was the transport industry.

For the first time highways engineers and local authority transport officers joined in the same union as those in Passenger Transport Executives and the bus companies. In a branch like the Merseytravel branch those working on the Mersey Tunnels teamed up with members from the PTE.

Thatcherite policies had already taken their toll. Metropolitan County Councils with their democratic Transport Authorities had been abolished and most bus companies had been privatised. 1993 saw the railways in the throes of being privatised. ‘Roads for Prosperity’ was the line but it soon became clear that the environment couldn’t cope with unfettered car use, whilst the economy couldn’t afford to build the roads in the first place.

John Major’s government had to change direction moved by a combination of environmental protests (remember ‘Swampy’?) and the consequences of past failed Tory budgets. As UNISON found its feet, members in highways departments and the public transport sector began to work more closely together. Major bus priority measures, park and ride schemes, new bus stations and better use of major road junctions were all on the agenda so for some in transport it was something of a good time. But for those within the bus companies there was a dash for short term profits and private greed. Jobs and terms and conditions went as smaller bus companies were swallowed up by large multi-national groups. Employment rights were rapidly reduced in line with employment security.

New hope came in 1997 to the sound of D:REAM’s ‘Things Can Only Get Better’. But it was a false dawn. The new Transport Secretary became known as Mr ‘Two Jags’ Prescott. Huge sums of money were wasted on consultants who came up with completely undeliverable plans. Promises to build more than a score of new light-rail systems including one in Merseyside were broken. Several major transport schemes proved to be either undeliverable of unsustainable.

Meanwhile on the railways a series of spectacular failures and high profile accidents led to the demise of Railtrack Ltd. On Merseyside the PTE took control of the rail franchising. Massive improvements to the service followed but at a cost likely to run into millions that the local community will more than likely be saddled with.

Then the economy crashed and the 2010 general election ushered in the arrival of ‘The Coalition’. Transport has fared as poorly as many other areas of public provision. Once again the government seems determined to spend what finance remains on lots more road schemes. This policy might be called ‘roads for austerity’ except that such a name would fail to encompass the dire environmental consequences and contradictions of such a policy being pursued by a coalition committed to a ‘low carbon agenda’. Roads for Armageddon anyone?

This all looks fairly familiar to twenty years ago. Two decades later though the staffing levels in many transport branches have reached levels that are so desperately low that the ability for many members to be able to do their jobs effectively is being seriously called into question. This experience, coupled with reductions in salaries, working conditions and job security now means that the last twenty years are starting to feel less like a circular ride to nowhere, and more like a simple downward spiral towards destruction!

Steve Cook
The Age of Austerity

Another year and another General Election. Given Gordon Brown’s standing in the polls it was perhaps not surprising that Labour failed to get elected but few might have predicted we’d get the coalition we did.

And so it was the age of austerity. There was an onslaught of attacks on jobs and services and pay and terms and conditions. Hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs would be destroyed causing hundreds of thousands of personal and family tragedies. The North West was particularly targeted by the government for cuts and no area of the region would escape unscathed. From Manchester to Lancashire, Bolton to St Helens via Wigan disputes were in full swing. All activists were reminded to keep their membership records up to date as employers were increasingly resorting to legal challenges to rule strikes offside using anti-union laws.

Austerity was being used as an excuse for privatisation and pay cuts. We lobbied Parliament over the Comprehensive Spending Review and condemned the plans for the NHS contained in the coalition’s Our NHS Our Future White Paper. We heard a speaker from the CWU talk about how the coalition was lining up the Royal Mail for privatisation. In education schools were being privatised by being forced (or bribed) to become academies – taken out of the local authority family to run as stand-alone institutions reporting only to Whitehall with the ability to opt out of national pay and conditions. Several long hard years of work to establish national bargaining arrangements for school support staff – the SSSNB was abolished by the new Coalition government before it had its first meeting.

Welfare ton up!

It was a busy year for Welfare who held seminars at Arena Point, launched the national Octopus Lottery and held an excellent dinner to mark 100 years of Welfare provision in the union. Long-time Welfare activist Paul Wiggins retired. Regional Council also paid tribute to former chair of the Regional Labour Link Committee Eileen Bennett who had also retired.

The year saw the tragic death of long-standing Wirral Local Government activist Neil Beacall and Regional Council stood in silence in his memory.

Scam!

2011 was a momentous year – Frank Hont retired in November (although he managed to chisel Life Membership out of us) and UNISON’s National Delegate Conference came to Manchester. Conference was held in the former Central Station (GMEX) conference centre and was a tremendous success. The open event in Castlefield, with barbecue, beer and beach was unique in conference history! The region also commissioned a play about the cuts – ‘Scam’ – which was also very well received.
It was another year of demonstrations and marches. UNISON generally and the North West in particular was well represented at the TUC’s anti-cuts demo on 26 March 2011 in London – despite those in coaches being not allowed to drop off further south than Wembley stadium. Still, it’s a place many Mancunians know very well!

Then on 2 October 2011 there was a massive rally in Manchester at the Tory Party Conference which was also an enormous success. A national rally opposing the Health & Social Care Bill took place in March 2012 in London.

The issue of pensions rumbled on and much hard work resulted in a decisive ‘yes’ vote and widespread support for the TUC Day of Action on 30 November 2011.

One million unemployed young people

And austerity continued. By November 2011 unemployment had risen to 2.57m, there had been 290,000 public sector job losses and there were then 1 million unemployed young people. In London there was an occupation and camp outside St Paul’s Cathedral while unrest spread around the world with particular problems in Greece and Spain.

The year saw the successful outcome of the Bury equal pay dispute – a five year fight, and an overwhelmingly successful industrial action ballot at Cheshire West and Chester City.

In February 2012 we met at Liverpool’s Quaker Meeting House and heard Tony Lloyd MP’s pitch to be elected one of the new Police and Crime Commissioners – a post no one except the Tory government thought we needed.

Recruit recruit recruit!

We heard about the increasing attacks on TU facility time; submitted motions on employment rights and government pay policy to annual conference and made recruitment a priority for the union. One of the figures that is hard to get your head around is that the region needs to recruit 20,000 members each year just to stand still, such are the comings and goings of the workforce. Nine new organisers had been appointed and there were three major local projects on organising – at the BT Contact Centre in Lancashire, across North West academies (already 135 in our region) and in Primary Care.

Branch treasurers had to get their heads around the new on-line branch accounting system which was being ‘rolled-out’ to branches.
Nelson eddy

Florence Hill and Jean Atkinson both retired, Bob Oram left us to join the NAS/UWT as a national officer and the Hont years were replaced with the Nelson (part 2) years as Kevan Nelson former Regional Convenor was appointed Regional Secretary from 1 December 2011.

Thrown on the scrap heap

Another new venue for Regional Council in 2012 was the People’s History Museum, appropriately enough with the address of Left Bank (in Spinningfields, Manchester).

In May a speaker from the TUC gave an intriguing talk about the issues facing us: already there had been 290,000 public sector job losses with another 450,000 jobs due to go in the next few years. Then there was the small matter of a two year, (or three in local government) pay freeze and then a limit of 1% for the following two years. Then there are the attacks on TU facility time, the privatisation of the NHS and the breaking up of the national education service – the first step in the privatisation of schools.

Solidarity

In October 2012 we heard speakers from Citizens UK about community organising and building alliances with community groups to achieve social change. Then there was Michael Mzwadile Makwayiba from the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (NEHAWU) who gave an inspirational address. He spelled out the truth about unfettered global capitalism and the international nature of the attacks on working people and their unions. He spoke of the need for solidarity with Cuba, Palestine, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. International solidarity is essential in the fight for working people’s rights across the world. And he lucidly exposed the false hopes pushed by the capitalists that hard work would ensure you too could join the global elite: “you will never become a millionaire - NEVER!”

Our campaigning work continued both within and without the Labour Party. In May 2012 we worked hard to defeat plans for a Manchester mayor while making sure Labour mayors were elected in Liverpool and Salford. Six more North West councils became Labour controlled and the first BNP Cllr in the region was defeated. Major disputes were ongoing in Cheshire West and in Choice Support in Stockport where members were looking at pay cuts of 30% and removal from the NHS Pension scheme.
Reflections Peter Thorne

In May 2002 my life changed. Burnley's Jimmy Anderson made his debut for Lancashire Cricket Club and the BNP got their first seats on Burnley council. Guess which made the news. Things were to get worse before they got better.

In May 2003 Jimmy made his England debut – and the BNP briefly became the official opposition on Burnley Council with 8 seats. But that was to prove their highpoint. In June of that year I made my maiden UNISON conference speech, Jimmy became the first England bowler to take a one-day international hat-trick and the BNP lost a by-election, making the Lib Dems the official opposition – and all in the same week!

I spent the next 10 years fighting the BNP and slowly but surely we turned the tide. In 2012 we finally knocked the last one off Burnley Borough Council and this May, as Jimmy hopefully takes his 300th test wicket, we knocked off their only county councillor so Burnley is well and truly BNP free at last. You've no idea how good that feels. At last I can take pride in being from Burnley without others only wanting to talk about the BNP. Even Jimmy wrote in his autobiography last year how he felt the presence of the BNP brought the town down.

Now we just need to replace Nick Griffin with Teresa Griffin next year and knock off the one remaining Pendle councillor and the job will be complete – and I know that we will succeed. It’s been a lot of hard work but the results have made it well worthwhile and we’ve shown that the extremists can be beaten, no matter how bad things may look at times.

Peter Thorne

Marching for a future (again!)

The North West once more played our part in national affairs with a tremendous presence on the TUC Demo in London on 20 October 2012. We campaigned against workfare schemes where welfare claimants are forced to work for nothing. We reaffirmed our support for the TUC Unemployed Centres and held a successful North West policy weekend in December 2012 in Blackpool.

We opposed the privatisation of patient transport services in Greater Manchester where the Arriva bus company had been named preferred bidder for non-emergency patient transport. We also held a reception for the campaign for justice for Bhopal survivors 29 years after the horrendous incident at the Union Carbide (later Dow Chemicals) plant.

The issue of fracking was also discussed with West Lancashire looking to be one of the new centres of this new goldmine – well gas mine – whatever the cost to the local environment.
Carol Lukey decided to stand down and Regional Council thanked her for her work as regional treasurer.

**Reflections  Carol Lukey**

**A woman’s place is in her union**

Lancashire County NALGO Branch was one of the biggest branches in that union. But it took the creation of UNISON in 1993 to enable women activists in that branch to play a full part in their union – not only in their branch but regionally and nationally as well.

The very male-dominated branch saw no reason why it should merge with former NUPE branches until forced to, or play an active part in the North West region. Women activists however, grasped the opportunities offered by the region to gain support and confidence to work within the new structures and push the branch forward.

It took until 1998 to fully realise their goal but what a sea change! A woman Branch Secretary. A woman Assistant Secretary. A woman Chair. A facilities agreement formalising the release of six activists and new offices outside of County Hall. None of this could have happened without close working regionally and nationally.

**Carol Lukey**

**Fear and loathing in Liverpool**

Which brings up to date pretty much. Regional Council met in Liverpool at the Quaker Meeting House in February 2013 and heard General Secretary Dave Prentis again sum up the difficult position of our union and its members. He spoke of the fear of losing your job, the fear of being privatised and the fear of losing money through reorganisations. We needed to lift the issue of pay up the agenda. The Living Wage campaign must be taken forward.

Anne McCormack announced she would stand down as Chair of the NW Labour Link Committee. We congratulated MANWEB branch on a successful ballot result, supported colleagues at University of Central Lancashire which was seeking to become a private company, and agreed to all do our best in an intensive recruitment fortnight in March.

Council agreed to submit motions to annual conference on Trade Union Rights and on Rejecting Privatisation and passed motions on the Jack Jones Trust, and Fracking.

Regional Council also reaffirmed its support for the TUC Unemployed Centres and the TUC One Fund for All – something coincidentally that we did at our very first Regional Council meeting in Southport in 1993.

What goes around…
The top table

We’ve had very few faces on our Regional Council ‘top table’ over the last 20 years. Before Anne McAleer who has been our President since 2003, there were Ken Orme (1993-96), Carolyn Baker (1997-99) and Frank Duffy (2000-02). Frank and Anne both also served as Vice Presidents as did Lynn Evans, Ann McCormack, June Poole, Jean Atkinson and current incumbent Glen Williams.


Treasurers have been Chris Dunford (1999-2004), Heather Pitman (2005-07), Carol Lukey (2008-11) and present Treasurer Angela Rayner since 2012.

Thanks to you all.

NEC Members

The Region has had a surprising number of NEC members in the last 20 years and the truth of the matter is that despite our best efforts we’ve been unable to find a definitive list of NEC members who served during the first few years of UNISON.

Only one poor soul has been on the NEC throughout the entire 20 years – step forward Knowsley’s Roger Bannister. Other long servers include Maureen Le Marinel, currently our National Vice President and soon to be President who joined the NEC back in 2003. Mike Folliard served at least 13 years between 1994 and 2007 and several others knocked up around a decade including Paul Glover, John Jones, Carol Lukey, Bob Oram, Les Page, Raph Parkinson and Helen Rose.

Others with more than five years’ service include Liz Carberry, Mark Clifford, Bernie Gallagher, Frank Hont, Carol Lyle, Peter Hunter and Maureen Vass.

There have been many other characters on the NEC.

Carolyn Baker, Sandy Bell, Angela Bowen, Liz Cameron, Charles Carruth, Judy Cotter, Elaine Cotterell, Bernadette Davies, Malcolm Dolman, Carol Dutton, Pat Gallagher, Magda Gillow, Angela Greenhalgh, April Grimes, Ann Hallam, Christine Hafiz, Vera Keary, Sue Mathie, Isobel McVicar, Jennifer Mortimer, Karen Reissmann, John Smethurst, Christine Sullivan and Tony Wilson are just some of the names we’ve been able to piece together from our records. Our sincere apologies to those we’ve overlooked.
For those of us active in the union at the time of the UNISON merger in July 1993, reading this excellent booklet is a sobering reminder of how time flies. So much has happened since, so much has changed and yet so much remains the same. For those who came into the union along the way, it provides a unique insight into the formative years of UNISON’s finest and largest region.

In the late 1990s over 200 UNISON adult care workers at the Tameside Care Group took 12 weeks strike action in opposition to their hourly pay rate being cut from £4.50 to £3.75 an hour. The employer was a spin off from Tameside MBC and cited reduced fees from health and local authority client bodies. Fast forward to 2013 and 115 UNISON adult care workers at Future Directions, a Community Interest Company in Rochdale, are taking strike action to prevent pay cuts of up to £10,000 per year. The employer, wholly owned by Calderstones NHS Trust, cites reduced service budgets imposed by local authority commissioners!

These two disputes bring home to us the continuities in the fight against outsourcing and privatisation and how it has been an ever present reality over the past 20 years.

Looking ahead, the threats being posed by neo-liberal austerity – severe cuts in public expenditure as well as an intensification of attacks on public service provision and the welfare state - will require us all to show the same courage and fighting spirit as our members in Tameside and Rochdale.

The surest way of safeguarding the union’s future is to remain a strong organising union. Relentlessly building our membership and workplace organisation. Developing our next generation of lay activists and leaders in the region – confident, motivated and trained to deal with the bargaining and organisational challenges presented by the fragmentation and marketisation of public services.

In celebrating our twentieth anniversary we give credit and thanks to the hundreds of regional activists and officials who went before us. Their legacy is the progressive culture of the North West region and the values which bind us together – our internationalism, our solidarity, our equalities campaigning and our political voice, notably our tireless campaigning against racism and fascism.

Forward to building an even stronger, more active, influential and united North West region – taking full advantage of the social media and communications technology that wasn’t even on the scene back in 1993.