



Greater Manchester Branch

Equity Conference 2023 - Reports

The following are reports from our three Representatives to Conference (in alphabetical order). Each representative has written their report from their own personal perspective.

Chris Clarkson's Report

I thoroughly enjoyed myself at Conference this year and I felt that, overall, the changes that Equity have been making over the last few years have been for the better (not everything, but the vast majority).

For example, there were a lot of different voices getting up to talk, something that has been an issue in the past with a lot of the same people (who were generally of the same demographic) going to the podium to speak. Also, the concerted effort to get rid of as many acronyms as possible was also well received. Even the title of the event ('Equity Conference' rather than 'Equity ARC' – which was announced last year) seemed like such an obvious, basic step forwards to making the event more inclusive and less obstructive.

A slimmed down Agenda (but with added extra fringe events) and audio versions of every important document also added to the accessibility of the Conference. I'd like to pass on a huge thank you to the organisers for their efforts!

Fringe Events attended;

- *Arts funding and the uses of campaigning (Live Performance Department)*

This talk focussed a lot about the lobbying by the Scottish National Committee of MSP's about public funding for the arts. They talked through the methods that they were using to campaign and showed us a vetoed video that we weren't allowed to discuss even outside of the fringe event (the video is now online so I'm allowed to say this now)!

- *Building union power: How to campaign (Campaigns Team)*

This event used our own Oldham Coliseum as an example of how to campaign, talking through all the stages from petitions, meetings, approaching the local council, the sit-in, presenting items to the Arts Council etc. I've come away with some great material and check lists that show how we can structure our own campaigns going forwards.

• *Equity4Women Toolkit Workshop (Women's Committee)*

This was a fantastic talk which showcased the brilliant new Toolkit. The amount of different help that the Women's Committee has assembled together in one place (their mantra is that every piece of info should be no more than 3 clicks away) is wonderful. I'm very pleased we've got them joining us in the summer to launch it in Manchester, too!

David Cockayne's Report

Put simply this was the worst Equity Conference I have ever attend, over about 30 years. The reason is simple: the new structure excludes any amendments to motions other than from the Council - an amendment must respect the intention of the original motion but may qualify, clarify or extend it in some way. Therefore, any real sense of debate had been filtered out of the process before the conference. This needs to be addressed in future and many members I met who have been to previous conferences strongly agree. This will require a rule change motion...sorry.

I would have submitted, via the branch or by other means, three such amendments: one which would have brought the particular motion into line with the legal procedures involved (Motion 1; Women's Committee) and the other to fully respect the Safe Spaces policy (Motion 4; Birmingham and West Midlands Branch), and to express serious doubt that the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 would form the right basis for the protection of performers' work under AI. I agree that protection is needed but the work I have done on Copyright over many years doesn't seem to offer the way to achieve this. (Motion 12: Screen and New Media Committee). Someone on Council, or advising them, ought to have been aware of this. Two other members have said that five other motions could have been usefully amended (5, 7, 9, 11, 15). That is eight motions, one-third of the total of 24.

To effectively deny democratic input to a third of the conference agenda, and for Council itself to do nothing to address these issues, shows how controlled our trade union has become. I know that many members glaze over when confronted by such issues, something that will need to be refreshed if Equity is to fully restore its essential bottom-up structure which was strongly emphasised in John Hendy KC's fringe event (see also the report this below).

It was good to see some old friends again. I ought also to say that I have worked for some years to explore that need for the conference to focus on matters of general policy, which has always been its purpose. This has, to some extent, been achieved but the loss of democracy is far from good.

Fringe Events attended;

- *Social Model 101: Understanding disability politics and working with Deaf, Disabled, Neurodivergent colleagues. (Deaf and Disabled Members Committee)*

Very interesting session which drew attention to the charitable and social modes of disability; what choices we need in receiving communications? - could branch communications also be in audio? - fonts, type size and other matters of print presentation. Being seen as “vulnerable” is no longer acceptable, all disability matters need to be seen in context.

- *Class of 2023: What it means to be Working Class in our industry today (Class Network)*

A wide ranging and informative session which covered the reduction of arts in schools; the broad state of higher level arts education and problems of access if the person has low funding. More theatres should be encouraged to offer apprenticeships, all of those who have taken these up have gone on to get work (Welsh National Opera, probably off-stage). David Morrissey focused on our personal rights; how should people be supported in their first five professional years; the problems of self-taping and of making a personal network by meeting people.

- *Organising against the far-right. (LGBT+ Committee)*

The far-right is building globally in both work-places and online. It is very evident in the space between Austerity policies and Neo-Liberalism (post-Thatcherism). There has been 100 years of anti-fascist action in the UK, we heard from the Hope Not Hate representative. We need to have a presence in all networks which seek to oppose the far-right.

- *Political attacks on the right to strike: A threat to workers’ rights, civil rights, and democracy at work. (Lord John Henry KC, Institute of Employment Rights)*

Superb session, a brilliant speaker. There was strong post WW2 consensus on workers’ rights which was finally broken by Thatcher’s changes to industrial laws. He is unsure if a Labour Government will fully reverse the changes made since 1980 (as a Labour Party member I agree with that). We need a full extension of collective bargaining across every sector of the economy - if we are fully self-employed, as some Equity members are, especially in the Variety and Creative Team areas, we may not be able to join strike action: self-employed workers should have the same rights as employed ones. Where ever collective bargaining exists there is diminution of inequality amongst those groups. Trade unions have to be fully bottom-up to be a true trade union, we do not have “bosses” in them, as the media often claim.

Lucas Smith’s Report

“Equity is the union that can’t stop winning!”

Attending the 2023 Equity Conference for the first time, my personal priority (aside from best representing the needs of the members of the Greater Manchester Branch, as well as

comrades as a whole) was to observe as much as possible the way in which Equity Staff, Council, Committees and the General Membership come together to decide upon the direction and the needs of the Union's Membership, the Industry and Community, and to glean a sense of the attitudes towards this process that are present across The Union.

The structure and running of the conference should be applauded - Sam Winter had done an excellent organisational job in leading brilliant staff members, President Lynda Rooke sat as inimitable Chair and our hosts, the TUC, provided a safe and very comfortable environment. Dinner at the BMA was a delight, and as you'd imagine from a hall full of actors, performers, creatives and worldly colleagues and allies, the camaraderie and sociability was a blast.

The general feeling was an incredibly positive one - as one would expect from such a room of people - and while there were some small grievances toward the new way in which motions are brought forward and debated, ample opportunity was given for representatives to air their thoughts and the thoughts of their respective branches. I was unsurprised by the way voting fell, and common sense seemed to prevail.

Hearing from Union staff and elected officials about the successes and drive of the Union was inspiring, and it was very moving and very joyous to see active members and activists celebrated for their hard work, and a great way to celebrate and inspire further the power and solidarity of Equity as a Union. Greater Manchester Branch's recent guest speaker, our friend Joseph Ballard, was given Honorary Life Membership for his invaluable activism.

Fringe Events attended;

- *Celebrating activism (Equalities and Education Officer)*

Reps from the Stand Up For 17 Campaign - West End Deps (@EquityLP) - gave us the run-down of their work and successes so far in securing pay rises and better treatment across The West End and beyond, and the GND team (@Equity4GND) talked about the creation of the Green New Deal Network. The panel and their colleagues used these as tangible, relatable framing for the way we can all involve ourselves in The Union, and play an active, participatory role in the solidarity of Equity.

"How can we expect anything to get better if we don't step forward and speak?"

<https://www.equity.org.uk/campaigns/stand-up-for-17>

<https://www.equity.org.uk/get-involved/networks/green-new-deal-network/>

- *Everything Everywhere All at Once: Protecting your rights in the future of film, TV and streaming (Recorded Media Department)*

The RMD used this as an opportunity to demystify the dense and complex world of rights, royalties and remuneration that already exists, Equity's active role in fighting to honour contracts, and the future of contracts and rights as we find AI a more and more prevalent part of the work we do, especially for the actors amongst us.

This gathering served as the first of an ongoing process of developing Equity's policy to protect the rights of creatives working with and around AI.