

EQUITY CONFERENCE 2023

MOTIONS PASSED

26 motions (including two emergency motions) were debated at Conference 2023, London, 21-22 May 2023.

The following motions were passed (for completeness, motions 7 and 9 were defeated and motion 21 was remitted to the Council):

EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

MOTION 1: Women's Committee

Our women members tell us that — with worrying frequency — they arrive at an engagement to find themselves working with someone who has abused or harassed them in the past.

The failure of many companies to make full cast and crew lists available prior to the first day of work means that members are unable to make critical decisions about the security of their own mental and physical health. It is a failure in safeguarding on the part of employers which makes all members — particularly our women and intersectional members — vulnerable.

Members identify two basic needs: (1) to know who is going to be in the room prior to the start of an engagement, and (2) for it to be easier for employers to release abusers from employment.

Conference asks that Council convene a working group, including representatives from each of the industrial and equalities committees, to work with the Women's Committee in order to identify and implement appropriate action.

MOTION 2: Deaf and Disabled Members Committee

The Deaf and Disabled Members Committee (DDMC) acknowledges the key strength and power that Equity exerts across the industry as a result of sound collective bargaining coverage and that this has resulted in a framework of rights for members that would not be available to them in their employment status as workers.

Noting the significant disadvantage faced by Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent members in seeking work and when in work, the DDMC welcomes an opportunity to strengthen their status and welfare by identifying and implementing measures to improve upon existing, specific rights in Equity's collective agreements.

Therefore, Conference calls upon Council to -

- 1) establish a working party comprising representatives of the DDMC and each industrial committee representing relevant collective agreements;
- 2) identify a core set of priorities for inclusion in the collective agreements over the period 2023-25.

MOTION 3: Race Equality Committee

Sheffield Theatres' upcoming production of the musical Miss Saigon is the first ever production of this highly contentious work in a publicly subsidised theatre. Miss Saigon has a long history of controversies going back to the 1990s and has been heavily criticised by Vietnamese-American writers and academics as 'a racial and sexual fantasy that negates the (Viet Nam) war's political significance and Vietnamese subjectivity and agency.'

New Earth Theatre had to withdraw their touring show from Sheffield Theatres when their Asian female lead creatives objected to being in the building while Miss Saigon was rehearsing. While our committee accepts that Miss Saigon will probably continue to happen in the commercial sector, we deplore that a publicly subsidised theatre is enforcing that lack of choice.

As a result, Conference asks Council to support a major inquiry to uncover the extent to which dignity at work for actors and creatives of colour and other protected characteristics is properly considered when programming decisions are made.

For the subsidised and independent sectors, this work should include national arts councils and local authority funders with reference to, for example, Arts Council England investment principles and local authority statutory equality duties.

MOTION 4: Birmingham and West Midlands Branch

Equity's Safe Spaces campaign was a landmark strategy for root and branch reform of the industry in order to eradicate sexual harassment as a feature of women members' working lives. Whilst Equity has enjoyed some relative success in achieving its goal, there remains further work to be done on the Safe Spaces agenda. As such Conference requests that Council -

- 1) reviews and refreshes the Safe Spaces strategy and campaign;
- 2) ensures that the new strategy and campaign incorporates all forms of harassment and abusive behaviour including but not limited to racism, antisemitism and homophobia;
- 3) ensures that the new strategy and campaign includes a focus on Equity's internal activities and including branch meetings, committee meetings, etc.

MOTION 5: London South Branch

Ensuring members' safety as they volunteer is vital for Equity to be a thriving and effective union. However, by the time a request for internal disciplinary action has been actioned in Equity's revised Disciplinary Procedures, significant damage to the complainant's mental health may have already taken place.

In addition, wider conversations around harassment of members against a backdrop of possible institutionalised racism, ableism, etc. is not easy. Regardless, Conference calls on Council to have the compassion and courage to take action around this.

The Independent Commission for Race Equality (ICRE) recommended that Equity ensures that race and ethnicity features as part of an ongoing Safe Spaces review.

Conference calls on Council to -

- 1) start a process to implement all of the ICRE recommendations - including identifying the staffing and budget needed to ensure this process has a good chance of success;
 - 2) include Equity itself and the volunteer activity of members on the agenda of a refreshed "Safe Spaces" initiative, by creating a working group to formulate a confidential consultation for all members, which is mindful of the nine protected characteristics, as well as social class, and bring in experts to look at how external expertise can illuminate any informal action before the stage of the disciplinary process in which the General Secretary takes a view on initiating formal action;
 - 3) ask the General Secretary to report on interim progress on the above.
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INTERNAL UNION BUSINESS

MOTION 6: Student Deputies Committee

Equity's Student and Graduate memberships offer a vital link between artists in formal training and the arts industry. Equity visits to educational institutions are an essential tool for recruitment of new members and for preparing new generations of trade unionists to enter the industry.

Increasingly, institutions are allowing or encouraging students to seek work during training. Currently however, Student Members are not entitled to legal support from their union in the workplace, and only eligible for discounted Graduate Membership three months before their course ends. This opens the door to artists-in-training being underpaid, overworked and exploited, but without the protection offered to full members. Furthermore, workers who enter the industry by routes other than formal training are disadvantaged by being unable to access discounted Student and Graduate rates at all.

Conference therefore calls on Council to undertake consultation and a comprehensive review of Student and Graduate Membership to ensure that it is fit for purpose and serving the interests of all members. This should include (but not be limited to) -

- 1) ensuring that artists-in-training also engaged on professional contracts are able to access appropriate support and benefits;
- 2) improving students' access to Equity's democratic structures, including being able to engage equally with two branches reflective of training area and home area;
- 3) considering whether 'Student' and 'Graduate' remain the most appropriate categories, or whether alternative discounted rates for, for example, 'early career members' might better reflect the range of backgrounds and routes that members take into the industry.

MOTION 8: North East England Branch

Equity's role as a campaigning trade union means that it is developing and encouraging activists to attend and participate in public protest and related activities more than ever before.

Such action has included participating in lobbying of MPs in the Westminster Parliament, attending TUC demonstrations, and participating in the Durham Miners Gala for the first time.

These are all welcome developments, but there need to be practical steps taken to encourage local activists to participate.

The insecure nature of our members' work means that too often it is unaffordable for many to give up work or take the time out to travel to events, particularly when they are in London.

Whilst one-off arrangements have been made to support activist participation, it is important that all members, including those in geographically distant locations, are properly supported to participate. Branch funds and support are limited and are meant to cover a range of activities for the wider membership.

Conference calls on Council to investigate practical and financial ways to support members to fully participate in campaigning activities without the need to drain the limited resources of their local branches.

POLICY

MOTION 10: Scottish National Committee

The Scottish National Committee thanks Equity for its part in the successful campaign encouraging the Scottish government to revisit recent funding cuts to Creative Scotland which would have had a direct impact on the employment potential of many creative workers across the country.

However, these proposed cuts and the lack of ongoing UK-wide support following the campaign launch have illustrated the lack of understanding between members of the cultural infrastructures across all four nations. At a time when all workers face a significant reduction in work, pay, and workers' rights, it is more important than ever that members show solidarity with their comrades across borders. It is not possible to do so without an informed understanding of the cultural infrastructure and therefore an understanding of how to lobby effectively.

Conference calls on Council and staff to work with the National Committees to develop a comprehensive and updateable resource that clearly details the cultural infrastructure in each of the four nations, highlighting the overlaps and the similarities, better enabling activists to support each other as we work together for effective change.

MOTION 11: London North Branch

Equity members and the arts have suffered a 46% cutback from austerity policies, COVID-19, the cost of living crisis and recent government 'levelling-up,' leading to 100% cuts to some London organisations but a majority of the cuts being outside London. The government has also slashed higher education spending on arts training courses by 50% alongside additional rising costs.

Our Equity arts policy, Performance For All (P4A), promotes an equitable rebalancing of funding but within an increased arts spend at European levels. The Arts Council England spend for 2023-26 is 28% less than for 2018-22 and overall government spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) has actually fallen.

Conference welcomes assurances that P4A is being promoted through our industrial work and will be revised on the website, but last year's Conference motion from the North and East London Branch has not been implemented and we are still waiting for discussion and consultation on the amendments, updates, revisions and additions created by former members of the arts policy working party, the Deputy for the General Secretary, and new policy officers.

We call on Council to -

- 1) organise staff consultation with all drafters of the new amendments to discuss how P4A can best be utilised and promoted;
 - 2) re-establish the National Campaigners Network in the light of the new branch structure and creation of local campaigns officers, but specifically to campaign, to share information on the industry and promote co-ordination and advancement of 'grassroots campaigning' across the UK.
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RECORDED MEDIA

MOTION 12: Screen and New Media Committee

Artificial intelligence (AI) continues to tear through the creative industries at an ever greater pace, threatening to upend members' working lives. Although Equity has achieved a great deal through its successful Stop AI Stealing the Show campaign, the union must now step up efforts to protect members' livelihoods and focus on a collectively bargained agenda in the face of AI's relentless, unlegislated developments.

To that end, Conference calls on Council to consider the following actions:

- 1) create an AI Working Party made up of members from a range of creative disciplines;
- 2) update and renegotiate existing collectively bargained agreements to include terms for AI and synthetisation;
- 3) seek to negotiate new collectively bargained agreements with performance synthesisers;
- 4) undertake an information programme to raise awareness of the impact of AI among the wider membership;
- 5) work with other UK unions to lobby for reform of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988;
- 6) liaise with sister unions within the International Federation of Actors (FIA) to support each others' work in this area.

MOTION 13: Audio Committee

With record earnings year on year, the UK video games sector is currently worth £4.7 billion, or 42% of the total British entertainment market.

Despite video games being one of the most lucrative and fastest-growing sectors in the UK, pay rates for performers have been declining since they were established in the mid-nineties. Equity members report a lack of diversity and inclusion in the industry, and vocal and physical injuries are a growing problem, with actors reluctant to make their concerns known for fear of losing future work in a very competitive market.

Equity has made a concerted effort to establish collectively bargained agreements with key industry engagers and is empowering its members with resources, workshops, and webinars. However, the UK does not have an industry-wide code of conduct and pay agreement for video games performers. Crucially, the industry lacks standardised protection procedures for the recording of intimate, sexual, or violent scenes, as well as clear guidelines addressing NDAs, diversity or digital reproduction rights. This stands in stark contrast to other major territories, such as Canada and the US.

Conference urges Council to -

- 1) accelerate the Union's collective bargaining agenda to create a fair industry-wide video games agreement that benefits all;
- 2) establish and improve working relationships with the trade bodies for Interactive Entertainment to establish industry best practice guidelines;
- 3) lobby the government to mandate those who claim Video Game Tax Relief to abide by an industry code of practice.

MOTION 14: Merseyside and Cheshire Branch

Conference welcomes last year's launch of Equity's first ever Code of Best Practice for self-tape auditions for commercials. However, despite the code being agreed with the major casting organisations, Conference is disappointed to note that members continue to face deteriorating terms and conditions including, but not limited to, the following:

- 1) given little time to turn around self-tapes, often less than 24 hours, when the code sets a minimum turnaround of two days;
- 2) working unpaid hours, filming and editing audition tapes and associated equipment costs;
- 3) almost never hearing back;
- 4) being used as unofficial COVID-19 cover by being pencilled for jobs and expected to keep sometimes weeks of diary free, only to hear the day before filming is due to start that they haven't got the job;
- 5) receiving £50 for a recall and sometimes nothing, a sum which hasn't gone up in over 15 years;
- 6) being paid a buyout of around £1,000, when successful, fees which have plummeted since the days when actors got paid per airing of the commercial;
- 7) being prevented, when successful, from doing any other commercial work for three years, whilst more famous celebrities seem to be able to change products without this restriction;
- 8) paying hundreds of pounds in travel without reimbursement.

Council is therefore urged to highlight what is happening in this area of work, and to enter into negotiations with all parties, not just casting directors, to stop what has become a dehumanising and unprofitable income stream.

MOTION 15: Kent Branch

Conference calls on Council to renew the Union's "Cast it Here" Campaign, with particular focus on TV and Film productions that continue to insist that artists must be London-based.

Conference also calls on Council to approach the Casting Directors Guild, the Casting Directors Association and Spotlight to address this practice, which is detrimental to so many of our members.

We have recently experienced absurd situations where productions filmed within Kent have refused to cast local-based talent or even permit them to audition for roles.

In terms of creating a sustainable industry, the policy of excluding local talent adds additional costs to producers and additional wastage in resources by relocating workers. It also prevents members who may not be able to afford to live within the M25 from accessing their industry. Producers are now required to be more environmentally accountable and local casting does and should perfectly complement this objective.

LIVE PERFORMANCE

MOTION 16: Opera Deputies Committee

Conference notes the significant attack on the provision of opera by Arts Council England with their disastrous funding decisions which threaten the survival of English National Opera at the London Coliseum and have already resulted in redundancies amongst the workforce. Deep cuts in the funding for Welsh National Opera and Glyndebourne have resulted in the cancellations of tours to venues, leaving cities such as Liverpool no longer receiving opera productions. Companies including Opera North and English National Opera have announced they will not fill existing vacancies, shrinking their chorus sizes and therefore the opera workforce. The Royal Opera House has also been hit with a 9% cut. None of these decisions have been taken in response to a strategy that properly reviewed opera provision, and it appears that Arts Council England have had no thought for the workforce or indeed the audience for opera.

Conference calls for Council to continue to increase pressure on ACE by campaigning with every means possible to resist and reverse cuts to public funding of large scale opera, and to engage with all funding bodies to ensure that their future funding decisions are based on a well-considered strategy which includes proper engagement with the opera workforce and ensures that opera is accessible to all across the UK.

MOTION 17: West End Deputies Committee

Theatre workers are often told not to talk about pay and this stigma allows producers to hold down wages, pay people different amounts for equivalent work, lie about the use of 'favoured nations' approaches and even forbid individuals from discussing rates of pay with their colleagues.

Conference calls on Council to campaign for greater pay transparency across theatre, including petitioning producers for the removal of unfair and unenforceable gagging clauses from contracts; educating members on their rights; and introducing annual pay audits of members, building on the work undertaken in the West End, in order to arm workers with the knowledge they need to negotiate fair rates of pay.

MOTION 18: LGBT+ Committee

All workers are suffering the consequences of a catastrophic housing crisis across the UK. Access to good quality, affordable housing is out of reach for millions. Housing insecurity is exacerbated for LGBT+ people by homophobia and transphobia. A shocking 24% of young homeless people identify as LGBT+.

Equally, the consequences of this crisis are felt in our industry, where the system of theatre digs is broken and does not provide secure, affordable accommodation to our touring members. Equity's Dignity in Digs campaign has found evidence of widespread issues of poor quality, unsafe temporary accommodation, as well as evidence of the additional threats that cheaper, unregulated accommodation present to the safety and wellbeing of LGBT+ artists on tour.

Conference calls on Council to build on its Dignity in Digs campaign by ensuring that future public policy on housing, including, for example, that set out in Labour's Charter for Renters, directly addresses issues around short-term letting and temporary accommodation faced by artists in our industry, while drawing on the specific experiences of LGBT+ people and other marginalised artists.

MOTION 19: Directors and Designers Committee

Conference notes the work Equity staff and activists have done across the theatre sector during the Dignity in Digs and Stand Up For 17 campaigns.

Conference further notes that both of these campaigns have focused on improving the terms and conditions of performer and stage management Equity members.

Conference recognises that creative team members work very differently to performers and stage management members and do not frequently encounter the union at work in the way their fellow performer and stage management company members do. Conference further recognises that low pay and poor terms and conditions are common problems for all theatre workers, and that Equity should seek to represent and champion the entirety of its membership to the best of our collective ability.

Conference asks Council to support the development of industrial campaign plans and programmes of work for Equity that will raise the profile of directors and designers across the union to build member density and awareness of Equity's work with and for creative team members. This should include consideration of how best to reach creative team members in our workplaces, how to communicate union successes with and for creative team members across union communications, a review of benefits and services Equity offers for the creative team, and how to better promote and celebrate Directors and Designers Committee activity across the UK.

MOTION 20: Brighton and Sussex Branch

Conference calls on Council, with regard to its published Code of Best Practice for Self-Tapes and Zoom Auditions, to further incorporate additional guidance for theatre and recorded media casting which addresses issues members are currently experiencing.

We acknowledge the current publication and guidance of this code and best practice that has been produced to make self-taping and remote auditions more accessible for all. However, there is concern that the guidelines do not yet fully take into account the different requirements of theatre and recorded media. To cite a recent example of good practice, the National Theatre of Scotland has successfully offered the choice to actors of whether they self-tape or attend auditions in person. We actively encourage this.

Conference therefore calls on Council to raise these issues and develop additional guidance to address members' concerns. Our continued ambition is that these guidelines will become accepted as industry standard practice in due course.

MOTION 22: Dance Committee

The Dance Committee recognises the success of Equity's Low Pay No Pay Campaign in improving conditions across the complex area of fringe theatre and would like to see similar work undertaken to reflect the dance and movement industry, so that engagers and workers are more informed about their obligations/rights.

The production of work across the independent and subsidised dance sectors is extremely diverse, and there are deep misunderstandings amongst engagers about appropriate rates for dance artists.

Currently, there is no specific trade association or body that Equity can negotiate these rates with, meaning current Equity/ITC rates - intended for dance or choreography alone - are being used as a basis when dance artists are engaged in research and development, utilising their intellectual property, and/or delivering additional engagement around productions.

The lack of rates truly reflecting the independent sector is a barrier to dance artists believing Equity can support them, weakening our Union potential.

Conference calls on Council and staff to support the work of the Dance Committee to build on the framework of Low Pay No Pay to create a dance-specific campaign for fairer conditions and pay across the diversity of the independent and subsidised sectors, including developing a series of effective resources that are reviewed and updated annually.

MOTION 23: Stage Committee

Conference calls on Council to give its full support to addressing and challenging the defunding of unionised work places in the latest round of Arts Council England funding. This has resulted in the immediate threat to, and loss of, members' jobs, all of which are on union-agreed terms. In parallel with the loss of funding to unionised work places, we are seeing a transfer of financing to non-unionised producers and to unnamed projects by Arts Council England, in particular, resulting in a deficit of jobs on union-approved terms.

Conference calls on Council to continue to lobby as necessary respective arts councils and governments to protect and prioritise funding to both established and up-and-coming producers who recognise the union and use our collectively bargained terms and conditions. Conference also calls on Council to continue its good work in encouraging producers newly in receipt of public money to adopt collective agreements.

MOTION 24: Stage Management Committee

Stage Management Committee's 2014 Conference motion asked for forthcoming claims on the Equity and UK Theatre/Society of London Theatre collective agreements to make best endeavours to ensure that "...where any member of stage management is expected to undertake any acting and/or understudying responsibilities that this role will be in addition to minimum Stage Management staffing levels."

Key arguments to support this becoming adopted policy were to -

- best ensure company health and safety;
- respect the professionalism and demands of stage management work.

Despite sterling work by activists and staff in improving the perception and understanding of Stage Management, there are still engagers advertising -

- acting ASM (assistant stage manager) roles, which cannot be safely fulfilled;
- combined role-CSM (company stage manager) positions on the book, which cannot be safely fulfilled.

This poor practice -

- increases risks to health and safety;
- makes workload for stage management untenable;
- impacts on the physical and mental health of the stage management workforce;
- drives employment shortages.

Conference asks Council to -

- reaffirm support for the 2014 motion and incorporate it into all future collective agreement claims;
 - expand the policy remit to include opposing and campaigning against combined stage management roles, which negatively impact safety;
 - encourage producers to offer members the opportunity of paid experience and/or training in order to keep companies safe;
 - prioritise communicating and educating members on rights, particularly in respect of health and safety;
 - support the Stage Management Committee to report on progress of the above during the next committee term.
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EMERGENCY MOTIONS

EMERGENCY MOTION 1: Council

Drag has been a celebrated artform in entertainment, ranging from Music Hall to Variety, with a recent renaissance in popular culture. There has been a significant rise in targeting drag artists who perform storytelling for children, with protests and campaigns from far-right extremist groups, most notably with recent demonstrations at venues in South London in March and April, but also across the UK. Ongoing abuse includes physical attacks, threats, slurs, name-calling, verbal and online abuse which is designed to destroy artists' careers and personal lives, resulting in loss of earnings and reputational damage, along with safety concerns not just in the workplace but at home.

We also note the wider picture, such as the prohibition of drag in some states of the USA, whilst hate crimes fuelled by transphobia and homophobia rise here in the UK, perpetuating debate around gender identity and sexual orientation.

Conference calls on Council to make sure the message of solidarity with affected members and drag artists is advocated, including to:

- Encourage branches and Variety Officers to reach out to affected members and potential members, so all feel safe and supported in solidarity.
- Ensure the establishment of drag networks across the UK is supported by local branches and includes the key message of this motion.
- Develop guidance for personal safety and how to respond to such activity, to complement the guidance written in partnership with Hope Not Hate.
- Emphasise that drag is a professional artform whether storytelling, variety and cabaret, theatre, audio or on screen.

EMERGENCY MOTION 2: Council

This Conference is very concerned about venue closures within recent weeks, due mostly to the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. There is already a significant loss of work because of four pubs closing in Bedminster, Bristol, causing one performer to lose 14 gigs in one go. Broad Plain Social Club, which is in a deprived area, is also closing, having been a community hub for many years as well as providing entertainment on a regular basis. Two other clubs are seriously concerned about rising costs, and one of them has cancelled their New Year's Eve as a result. This Conference asks Council to actively raise awareness by helping to offer links to other organisations which may offer support, such as local trade associations, Councillors, and any other group which may be able to help, even if it means seeking alternate venues.
