



## **GMB Northants Branch Secretary's New Year, 2025 - Address to Members**

Can I take this opportunity to wish our members, their family and friends a very happy New Year. Reflecting on the passing year 2024, for me personally, it has been one of active work in the field of representing and advising members and in preparing for the General Election in July 2024. The result was a crushing defeat of the Conservative party and the return of the first Labour Government in 14 years, leaving the political landscape very different to what it was in January 2024.

Whichever way you choose to view it, it was always going to be a difficult transition after 14 years of political mismanagement and economic incompetence and so it proved to be. Labour's radical budget set a bold agenda for the new government, and with a new Conservative leader further on the right, we may well be witnessing a sharper left-right divide in politics than in previous years, especially given the electoral popularity of Reform. While across the pond, Trump's extraordinary political comeback to the presidency could have significant ramifications on our politics and may serve to fan the flames of the UK's growing hard-right wing. Time will soon tell!

Nevertheless, we have seen some positive action from the new government, with above inflation pay awards already in place and as our union leadership quite rightly pointed out, "this must be a start not a finish". However, who could argue that it's been a rocky start for the new government and the direction of travel has definitely changed from what was promised, based on what they found coming into office. Some might quite rightly argue, that instead of setting a positive vision to rebuild the economy and society, the Labour leadership has served up more of the same tough choices, going against many within the trade union movement pressing the government to change direction on key policy decisions.

Notwithstanding that, the result was decisive – Keir Starmer was elected with a huge mandate, just shy of Blair's 1997 performance, Labour's biggest win in parliamentary terms, despite winning only 33.7% of the popular vote.

Amid a premiership marred by various Tory scandals, the cost-of-living crisis, and a failure to tackle immigration, voters firmly rejected the Conservatives, who suffered the biggest defeat ever in the party's history. With only 121 MPs elected to parliament, the Tory vote share was less than half that of their 2019 performance, winning a mere 23.7% of the popular vote. So crushing was this defeat, that the night saw various high-profile conservatives ousted from their seats including Penny Mordaunt, former Prime Minister Liz Truss and Jacob Rees-Mogg, to name a few.

Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats emerged fairly reinvigorated up 64 seats to a total of 72. And Reform UK, which despite winning only 5 seats, achieved over 4 million votes, at 14.3% of the total vote share, playing a pivotal role in toppling Conservative majorities in hundreds of seats. In a historic night, voters firmly rejected the past 14 years of Conservative rule, resulting in a Labour majority of 172, giving Keir Starmer the secure means to pursue his legislative agenda.

So, where does that leave us as a trade union ushering in the New Year 2025 and continuing to look after and support our membership? Happier days ahead or more suffering through a programme of potential austerity that will inevitably impact on working people? We have been very clear from the outset about what we are looking for from the new government. What we need is a clear and positive political shift, which is good for working families and their communities. Looking at where the real wealth is and getting them to contribute more to society rather than imposing more hardship on workers. As it stands, the lack of specific wealth and property taxes targeting those with the most in our society, is, I believe, a glaring omission.

The Chancellors failure to ensure the super-rich pay their fair share, is equally not a good luck for a Labour government. This has to change! As always, we are encouraged to look positively on the journey ahead. There are, without doubt challenging times ahead for members and their families and this government needs to prioritise policy decisions that support their needs.

Setting the tone for the new Labour Government, Rachel Reeves' October budget broke records as the most radical government spending programme in decades. The Chancellor raised spending by £70bn a year over the next 5 years, including a £22.6bn cash boost for the NHS in 2025-26. Generally speaking, unions gave the budget a qualified welcome to labour's spending plans on the public sector. A vision that demonstrates economic stability and growth is possible by investing in the NHS, schools, care and local councils, where a significant number of our members work.

In appraising the budget and being equal and fair, the Chancellor did stand by Labour's manifesto pledge not to raise VAT, income tax or national insurance, instead turning to a £25 billion increase in employer national insurance contributions, higher rates of capital gains and inheritance tax, and changing the rules covering wealthy foreign individuals living in Britain.

Despite being hailed as a budget for growth by the chancellor herself, the Office of Budget and Responsibility (OBR) assessment of the spending plan said the economy would expand at the same rate as predicted in March 2023. Hardly encouraging but expected, given the economic mess we were left by the previous Tory government.

It goes without saying that raising £40 billion without increases to income tax rates, VAT or national insurance is an impressive political feat, one that will play in Reeves' favour from her promises not to tax working people. But the budget has not come without its backlash. For example, higher national insurance contributions has been viewed as amounting to a stealth tax on jobs, potentially undermining Labour's growth agenda and as trade unions we need to be careful as to how we navigate that debate.

In the weeks prior to the budget, the pre-empted rhetoric from the frontbenches was of a £22 billion black hole in public finances left by the Conservative Government, with the Chancellor advising that, "this is not a budget we want to repeat". These are bold, high risk policy decisions and many would argue necessary economic measures that need implementation sooner rather than later.

The full fiscal outcome of this budget may not be seen for years, if not decades, but already some of those decisions are causing divisions within the labour movement and not least among trade unions and newly elected MPs. Let's take a closer look at some of those measures that caught the attention of the broader electorate and some of the more contentious decisions that have already been taken.

- 1. Welfare Bill in Parliament (child benefit)** . In 2015, the Tories' passed this Bill which slashed support for the poorest in our society with a range of policies. One of those policies was the two-child benefits cap, which caused early drifts of allegiance within the Labour Party. This policy was cruel and it is proving to be the case. More than half of parents who were hit by the policy were already in work; the policy simply pushed them further into poverty and needs to be re-addressed by government. This shocked and dismayed some Labour MPs who did not vote with the government on a genuine point of conscience with high levels of child poverty in their constituencies and subsequently they had the whip suspended for six months.
- 2. Winter Fuel Allowance.** Where to begin with this! One of the most contentious issues presented by the government when it was introduced ahead of the Budget. These measures have been met with outrage from many unions, not to mention pensioners, charities resulting in the National Pensioners Convention protesting outside parliament, supported by many trade unions who called for its immediate removal at TUC and Labour conferences. The decision has not been popular with many trade unions with one seeking a Judicial Review to overturn the government's decision to cut winter fuel payments to all but the poorest pensioners. As ordinary pensioners are experiencing cuts and stealth tax, the super-rich have been asked to contribute very little extra. This is not the change the public was promised!
- 3. Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI)** The decision by the government not to compensate women has been seen as a betrayal after they confirmed recently that they will not be committed to compensation. Work and Pensions Secretary, Liz Kendall said "compensating the cohort would not be fair or proportionate use of taxpayers money." This decision is a cruel blow to a generation of women, some of whom are now suffering financially. Thousands of women had been clinging to the hope that they'd won the case for the proper compensation they rightly deserve. The government must find a way to resolve this demonstrably unfair situation. Refusing to pay compensation is not the answer. Our very own Pat Willmott, Equalities Officer has campaigned tirelessly for WASPI women and kept the branch updated and informed on progress and we are intent on continuing to support her in her endeavours to change the mind of the government on this important issue.

I did say from the outset that all unions must stay positive and continue to campaign on issues that directly impact their membership and to be fair and balanced in that appraisal, let's consider what government has done to support union efforts to protect workers rights going forward.

- 1. Employment Rights Bill.** We welcome the improved rights for union organising, essentially, the governments Employment Rights Bill launched in October. This will boost union's presence in the workplace and help them to recruit and organise as well as improving rights for individual workers. These are measures that will better equip unions to operate in the modern workplace. The Bill gives unions the right to enter a workplace to meet, represent organise and recruit workers and will enhance collective bargaining . This is something our own branch have concentrated and focused on with our development plan in 2025 and which we will be discussion at

the next branch meeting. These are important reforms for all trade unions which will remove the shackles of more recent anti-union measures but also bring in important new rights to better enable unions to recruit and organise workers and to improve pay and conditions in the workplace.

- 2. Sexual Harassment in the Workplace.** New legislation for tackling sexual harassment in the workplace is an issue I have personally represented and advised on with my work as an Accompanying Rep. From the 26<sup>th</sup> October 2024, employers must now proactively take steps to prevent sexual harassment at work. Until now there has been no protective legal obligation on employers to take steps to prevent sexual harassment at work. As a result of the Workers protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) employers must not wait until something has happened before they act. Instead, they must reduce the risk of it occurring in the first place. This moves us from a culture of redress to one of prevention which all unions and their member's welcome. Labour's new Bill will require employers to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment and furthermore, it will explicitly protect workers who blow the whistle on sexual harassment.

The new Bill promises 28 employment law reforms in nine areas:

- Zero hours contracts
- Fire and rehire
- Day one rights
- Sick pay
- Flexible working
- Maternity protection
- Enforcement
- Pay bargaining
- Trade union rights.

These are significant improvements to employment rights, including statutory sick pay from day one of employment and the removal of the qualifying period for unfair dismissal, albeit the latter is tempered by the introduction of a statutory probationary period during which there will be a 'light touch' procedure.

- 3. Young Workers.** The new Employment Rights Bill is especially good news for young people who, very often, have been at the economic sharp end, facing insecurity and rising unemployment. Measures in the new Bill include removing the discriminatory minimum wage age bands (currently 16-to-17-year-olds and apprentices can be paid £6.40 per hour and 18-to-20-year-olds £8.60, well below the £11.44 National Living Wage. Young workers need to be in a union and know why the union can help and support them in the workplace. Fortunately, there are signs of growth in membership which we need to encourage further and the introduction of the ceiling age from 26 to 30 in our union and other unions will, I believe, strengthen the stability of young members forums by extending the time in which activists can work in that capacity .

So, moving forward into to this New Year 2025, I want to reflect on the journey we have been on together over the past few years. Ever the optimist, we have to believe there will be challenges there is also hope and opportunity. As a union, it is time to unite, strengthen our resolve and push forward as a cohesive force in advocating for workers' rights and social justice with a steadfast commitment to the principles of solidarity, equality and justice.

Indeed, justice resonates deeply with our mission as trade unionists and we should draw from those inspirations to drive forward our efforts in the coming year.

It's important that we do this as a trade union, remembering that our struggle transcends individual interests, entrusting us with the responsibility to care for one another and advocate collectively for the rights of all workers. As trade union members, we already embody this principle in everything that we do as a trade union. Whether you are in manufacturing, public service, education or healthcare, we must recognise that our victories and challenges are intertwined. Recent strikes and collective bargaining efforts demonstrate that when we stand together, we wield power that cannot be ignored.

As we move forward together in 2025, I urge us all to deepen our commitment to the principle of solidarity. We cannot and must not let divisions arise between different sectors of workers and we must ensure that every member of our union feels valued and heard. Let's support one another as we push for better wages, safer working conditions and more robust job security for all of us and never forget, our strength lies in our unity.

These social values are not just important in the workplace but throughout our communities. It is not enough to advocate for our rights solely as workers, we must extend our efforts to combat systematic injustices that affect marginalised groups. We can do this by working alongside other movements that strive for racial equality, gender equality and environmental sustainability. We can achieve this by taking a proactive stance in our local communities. By strengthening our unions, we create a more equitable society for everyone.

As we drive that agenda into 2025, let's commit ourselves to advocating for a fairer economy. This means fighting against exploitative practices that prioritise shareholder dividends over fair wages and humane working conditions.

Let's use our collective voice to call for policies that rein in corporate greed and ensures that wealth is distributed more equally. Together we can build our movement that not only fights for better conditions at work but also champions a new economic paradigm that prioritises human dignity and well-being over profit margins. Let's make 2025 the year we unite our GMB voices, deepen our connection and amplify the collective power we possess as workers.

**Let's hear from you!** I urge you to participate actively in our initiative. Let's hear what you have to say, listen your ideas on how we can support each other, our union and our communities. Come along to our monthly branch meetings and talk with us, we want to hear from you.

Finally, Thank you all for your unwavering commitment to our great trade union movement and here's to a successful and impactful year ahead in 2025.

**Best wishes,**

**Alan Irwin**

Branch Secretary

GMB Northants Community Branch C51.