

NUJ Delegate Meeting 2014

THE NUJ's biannual Delegate Meeting was in Eastbourne in April. DM is the conference that votes on Union policy and on proposed changes to its rules and policies, and was immediately preceded by an NUJ Freelance Sector Conference – see page 3, and, below, the report to the DM by Freelance Organiser John Toner.

NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet opened DM by celebrating Union recognition being won for NUJ members at Al Jazeera in the UK. NUJ Irish Secretary Seamus Dooley reported that the Republic's Competition Authority are targeting freelance workers in the mistaken belief that allowing them to publish suggested rates for the job would damage the economy. Ireland's politicians are pretending that "the [EU] Troika telling us what to do is all the fault of freelance photographers and their 'price-fixing'" but "we are not taking this lying down."

The quality of the debate was, in this observer's humble opinion, far higher than the usual dire standard. Some speakers even admitted to changing their positions as a result of arguments that had been eloquently made. There was an unusually high proportion of motions that went to card vote – rather than the usual show of hands being accepted, the doors were shut while the tellers went through the aisles counting delegates' cards held in the air.

Among the most hotly debated proposals to DM was that to change the Union's subscriptions system.

With falling membership resulting in reduced income, the Union faces a financial crisis unless subscriptions can increase. Several speakers, including staff at the NUJ, reminded members that staff had taken a cut in paid-for hours, agreed to take a hit on their pensions, and not had a pay rise beyond one per cent for many years. NUJ Irish Secretary Seamus Dooley commented "An army fights on its stomach, but you have to pay for the bloody food!"

The subscriptions system is currently based on a member's "grade" and sector, with a cap at one per cent of a member's taxable income and further complications.

LFB was active in backstage negotiations which separated the original Motion 69 on subscriptions into two. One allowed subscriptions to be raised. A separate motion sought to allow new members to be put onto a new subscription system based on members' income rather than on grade and sector. It lost.

The proposal to raise subscriptions passed. The plan to put new members on a new system failed to gain the necessary two-thirds majority for a "rule change". Another proposal, to give the NEC limited powers to raise subscriptions between DMs to take account of inflation – was rejected.

DM also voted to stop having an elected Deputy General Secretary, a post whose rôle has been unclear for some time. Other motions passed at DM included campaigning on threats to the rights of the self-employed in the Welfare Bill. DM condemned the system of up-front charges for requests and appeals brought in by Ireland's current Freedom of Information Act. It reaffirmed the need to work on the consultation on the UK Data Protection Act post-



Leveson. LFB's delegation was two-thirds female and 50 per cent were delegates for the first time. Among several LFB delegates making their first speeches to DM for the first time was our delegate Teresa Coucero, who urged journalists to retain their independence while speaking against a proposal supporting a boycott of Israeli goods. The motion was defeated.

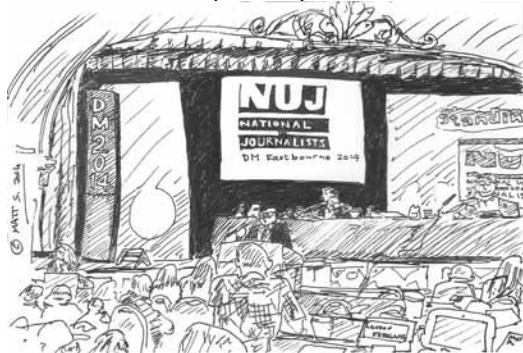
LFB Secretary Dr Francis Sedgmore covered DM on Twitter: see also LFB's Twitter feed and #NUJDM14 – all linked from the much longer and more profusely illustrated version of this article online

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• Much more at www.london-freelance.org/fl/1404dm.html

Honouring Mike Holderness

DM was also the occasion for *Freelance* editor Mike Holderness to be made NUJ Member of Honour, for his quarter of century's work for the Union, particularly in the fields of defending copyright and empowering journalists and trade unionists through new technology. Freelance Industrial Council Chair Tim Dawson listed Mike's many achievements – the LFB website, probably the first of any media union in the UK, if not the world – the Rate for the Job engine, the online Freelance Fees Guide, the Freelance Directory. When Mike speaks to the World Intellectual Property Organization, said Tim, they "sit up and take notice", such is his expertise. And pro-copyright alliances have been able to influence or mitigate recent UK intellectual property legislation: this has often been due to quiet, patient lobbying by Mike in the House of Lords. Above, Mike with the Honourable Certificate: photo © Pennie Quinton twitter.com/penniequinton



How DM may have looked © Matt Salusbury

The curse of the freelance classes

FREELANCE Organiser John Toner gave a freelance sector report that focused on "unpaid work... the curse of the freelance classes. Where has this idea come from," he asked, "that journalistic work should be provided for free?"

John noted that clients prefer to use the term "content" because "to call it work would give it value." We now face the excretions of "a billion egos who believed their opinions are

of interest to someone other than their cat."

Publishers, added John, ask journalists: why should we pay you if we can get content for free? Why, then, should we bother to download their "content"?

And why, asked John, "is this happening in an industrialised country where the rule of law operates?"

It's because we have "no National Minimum Wage for self-employed

people... It is legal to work for nothing" so long as you're not employed.

And freelances also have "no right to collective bargaining... Freelances do not have to right to strike." But as other forms of work diminish, "our industry is rapidly becoming freelance" with "no statutory rights".

We need to press for those among our sister unions in the Trade Unions Congress "to enable freelances to learn a living wage."