



Southern Region Retired Members Association

Annual Conference Tuesday 27 June 2023, 11am, Chessington

Conference notes

Megan Dobney, President, welcomed delegates saying that the Committee had worked hard, with the support of the office staff, particularly Debbie and Alice, to get you here!

Guest speaker Justin Bowden

She introduced the guest speaker, Justin Bowden, Southern Regional Secretary, and explained that the Committee had planned to also have a parliamentarian to update us on relevant matters. Vicky Foxcroft MP – she is the Shadow Minister for Work & Pensions and also an MP in our Region (Lewisham & Deptford) – was invited but unfortunately she is required in the House of Commons today and sent her apologies.

Megan's thoughts turned to someone from the House of Lords – a Lady not a Lord so we could maintain the GMB's policy of 50:50 male/female representation. She contacted two Labour Ladies who are Shadow spokespeople on Health & Social Care. She emailed Baroness Gillian Merron and left a telephone message for Baroness Margaret Wheeler – but had no reply from either, which, she commented, was rather rude...

Justin Bowden thanked the Committee saying it was great to be here in person (last year was by Zoom). He was here to listen after setting the scene. The activities of the retired membership is potentially a huge asset. Things are looking good in the Region and nationally with many campaigns, battles and disputes. We live in interesting times...

We have gone back to basics – we are in the workplace, looking for natural leaders, listening and supporting campaigns. Definitely back to the “bottom up” model, away from “top down”. This has allowed us to reverse membership losses over the Covid period.

Disputes are an item on every monthly Regional Committee – we have 22 live industrial disputes at present, plus hundreds of other campaigns. And we are avoiding disputes often as employers are just paying up. There is an ISS strike today at Maudsley Hospital – it all focuses employers' minds.

As Bob Crow said: “If you fight you won't always win. But if you don't fight you will always lose”.

We are in the ninth month of membership growth. This is unprecedented and a positive message.

We can always use extra support and assistance – it is great when people turn up on the picket line!

Another focus is to rebuild our involvement in May Day next year. It has lost some of its resonance. It should be universally celebrated so we are putting on a big push for that with your help.

The President thanked Justin and opened the floor to delegates.

- What is the current membership?

J: including retired members around 570,000. We are seeing an increase of 1,500-2,000 a month.

- I would like to see a return to the closed shop. In K19 branch we are usually visiting workplaces with no Rep
- The previous speaker represented me at work and the company treated us better as union members than those that weren't. Many engineers don't know the union exists or that they can join as individuals

J: K19 is a fantastic branch and very well run. Regarding the closed shop – I have no difficulty with the concept but change would rely on politicians. There are some positive proposals in the Labour Party manifesto that is being developed – they would give us greater access to workplaces. It's all about finding natural leaders – we've just broken into Amazon and everyone said Uber was impossible. We'll support them when found.

- What's the situation with the WASPI women? [*women whose state pension was affected by the Tories speedy increase in their retirement age from 60 to 65*]

Neither Justin nor the President knew the latest position but a member said many cases are now with the Ombudsman after years of campaigning and court action.

- Are disputes keeping up with the old requirement of keeping up with inflation and improving living standards?

J: Generally yes. For example there is a dispute in Wiltshire where the Council cut wages by 20%. We are still holding out whilst other unions are not. So our members have maintained their position for 18 months over other workers who've had the pay cut.

- The President said we would be electing our delegates to the national RMA Conference later in this meeting – these are funded by the national union. Would the Regional Secretary be able to fund an additional 2 observers to the Conference? The cost would be one night in a hotel and travel expenses.

J: Approach me after you have done this. Depending on the circumstances of their branch I may approach their branch for support. Contact me after this Conference.

Derrick Baker, President of the national RMA Committee, congratulated Justin, Debbie and Megan on their work to achieve a good attendance at the Conference. The President thanked Justin for his attendance and engagement.

President's report

Megan reported that this has really been a year of building. The most useful thing we have done is to get the resources agreed by the Region to contact all our members – by email and by post. This might not sound like much – but we have over 7,000 members. And we only had 3,000 email addresses. And we all know the cost of postage!

We had hundreds of responses to our letter requesting that members send in their email address. But still be aware that emails on this scale can't be sent out by Committee members, only by the office – so we still have to wait for staff time to be available.

The Committee has met 6 times since the last conference – alternatively online and in-person.

We have maintained our activity within the National Pensioners Convention. The NPC is an umbrella group of organisations of retired members, including most trade unions. This has been led by two Committee members – Derrick Baker who represents the GMB on the NPC's national transport committee, and Christine Sanders who sits on the London Region NPC's Health & Social Care Working Group. The important point to note is that this is not a personal activity – both members are delegates and provide the Committee with reports of each meeting so we are aware of the issues being discussed.

Each GMB Region is entitled to nominate 2 people to the GMB's national RMA Committee – these seats are filled by Derrick Baker and I. Again, we report back to the Regional Committee.

In September last year I addressed the Southern Region Committee to seek its support for the RMA. I asked for 3 things:

- Information about the RMA to go to every branch secretary so members know how to join when they retire
- Officers to tell us when they are conducting disputes so we can support
- A postal mailing to members so we can draw as many as possible into email communication

All three were agreed.

I looked back on what I said the Regional Committee:

“With a new and extreme right wing Prime Minister taking up her role, there's never been a time when collaboration and solidarity within and between unions is more necessary. The financial attack on the working class has rarely been more severe and we can expect some structured attacks on trade unions and our right to exist, never mind take action.”

I was correct on all points which just goes to show you don't need a crystal ball to see what the Tories will do next!

In September last year our Secretary and Treasurer resigned as they moved on, we decided to try and fill the Secretary post (unsuccessfully as it turned out) but not bother with a Treasurer as we hadn't got any money anyway! We also sought further Committee members and that was extremely successful and we now have a full house which is very gratifying.

We produced a flyer inviting members to join us on retirement and both it and the application form are posted on our webpage. Incidentally, we have since posted vital information about how to access Pension Credit and the GMB's funeral benefit. All work relating to the flyer and the website should be credited to Rob Carlson, the Region's Head of Campaigns and Communication – many thanks Rob for your speedy responses to my requests. Access the webpage here <https://www.gmb-southern.org.uk/campaigns/retired-members-association>

So I can't say it's been an exciting year, but we have made progress!

Report of the Retired Members Association national Committee

The President invited Derrick to make his report as President of the National RMA.

He said he had been re-elected as President of the Committee in March and listed other officers elected. GMB General Secretary Gary Smith had addressed that meeting and also made presentations to those retiring from the Committee.

The RMA's finances are in a good state and the usual stall at GMB Congress had raised £1,000 for the RMA's funds.

There is an ongoing discussion on the RMA's Constitution – this will be finalised on 11 July.

He also reported on his membership of the National Pensioners' Convention's Transport Committee. The Secretary had died but new people are coming on.

They have discussed the terrible impact e-scooters can have, breaking regulations, few prosecutions, the fire hazard caused by lithium batteries (as have e-bikes and disabled people's scooters), and the fact that the scooters are silent.

He noted that some regions' RMAs are quite wealthy with holiday offers and xmas lunches – bringing retired people together. The President invited comments and questions.

- A member said he had been knocked down 3 times by e-scooters. They are illegal but still widely used

D: They have no lights, no horns and shouldn't be used on public land. There are cases of huge hospital costs arising from accidents.

- If you hire one you are covered by insurance. The law may be changing?

D: The changes have been put back to November.

- Additionally the green bikes for hire in London are a hazard as people leave them all over the pavement.

Election of Secretary and Treasurer for our Committee

The President said there is no formal job description for the Secretary, but she would describe the role of Secretary as to take the minutes of the Committee and other meetings and produce them in a timely manner, to collaborate with the President and Committee members, and to actively promote the work of the Committee.

The GMB RMA Constitution says: "The Regional Conference at its first meeting will elect from its number the offices of President, Secretary, and Treasurer. These positions will be subject to the endorsement of the Regional Secretary and or the Regional Committee. The term of each office held will be 4 years".

The remaining term of office is 2 years – until June 2025.

She asked for nominations or volunteers for the Secretary's post first, then the Treasurer. Voting will be show of hands as per the constitution for the national RMA Conference.

- Mike Goff (B40 Bournemouth) was nominated and elected unopposed as Secretary.

There were no nominations for the post of Treasurer.

Election of 2 delegates to the National RMA conference

To take place on Tuesday 17 October 2023, in London. Hotel accommodation will be provided for 16 October if required.

The duties of the delegates will be to:

- Attend the conference
- Speak to the motions submitted by the Region
- Produce a written report for circulation to the Committee – in a timely manner

As the GMB's membership is more or less half and half men and women, our delegates should reflect this with one of each sex.

- Gena Grant (L26 Richmond & Wandsworth) and John Powell (W27 Tolpuddle) were elected

The President then called for nominations for Observers to the Conference.

- Leila Kassam (X96 South London Universities) and Caroline Watson (L32 LB Sutton) were elected as Observers

Consideration of motions submitted

Four motions had been received and the President invited the movers to speak.

Motion 1: Age limits on RMA benefits Proposed by Caroline Watson

Conference calls on the GMB to reconsider the ban on Retired Life Members under the age of 60 receiving Legal Assistance.

Conference believes that those who are made redundant and therefore have to retire and take a pension should be eligible as they had no choice but to take their pension.

- Carried 14 for, 2 against, 3 abstentions

Motion 2: UK state pensions received overseas Proposed by Martin McIntyre

Conference calls on GMB sponsored MPs to be made aware that retired members' British state pensions are frozen when living in certain overseas countries.

This is unfair and discriminatory as the pensions are not increased in Australia, for example, but are in the USA.

Could the MPs bring this inequality to the Government's attention and try to get some movement on this issue.

- Carried 15 for, 0 against, 4 abstentions

Motion 3: Wifi radiation Submitted by Kevin Hogarth but moved formally by the President

Conference calls upon GMB to recognise the dangers to health of constant exposure to wifi radiation that can lead to the development of cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's in retirement and calls upon GMB H&S reps to demand that employers provide workers with PPE such as Blushield, Floww or Waveguard or similar devices to mitigate if not eliminate such hazards in the workplace.

- Carried 10 for, 1 against, 8 abstentions

Motion 4: Pension Credit unfair on those with small private pensions Proposed by Parvin Sethi

Conference notes that many pensioners are much poorer than those receiving Pension Credit.

Pension Credit entitles you to many other benefits such as no Council Tax, no charge for dental appointments or spectacles, travel costs to hospital, Warm Home discount and so on.

The addition of a private pension of as little as £39 a week can remove entitlement to Pension Credit and all the other State benefits that come with it.

Conference calls for this matter to be looked at with a view to achieving greater fairness.

- Carried 16 for, 0 against, 3 abstentions

The President said we are entitled (but not obliged) to send up to 3 motions to the national RMA Conference. Delegates had 2 votes each and motions received the following support:

- Motion 1 – 2 votes
- Motion 2 – 14 votes
- Motion 3 – 3 votes
- Motion 4 – 13 votes

- It was decided to submit motions 2 and 4 to the national Conference.

Regional RMA campaigns

The President said that the point of the RMA was not endless meetings, but action supporting our retired members and our working members.

Following thorough discussion it was decided that the following were our priorities (not in order of importance):

- 1) **Much greater engagement of young people into the trade union movement.** Kathy Abu-Bakir described how her branch had focused on meeting and talking with young people at Merton College.

ACTION: KA-B to ask one of her branch members to briefly write up their experiences to share with other branches with local technical or similar colleges in their area to do the same – on the basis that the wheel has been invented! This to be circulated by the office to Branch Secretaries.

- 2) **Southern Region RMA flags** – light and easy to use. Megan Dobney said that the production of flags had already been agreed in principle. It would support the points that Justin made in terms of members visiting picket lines and May Day participation, as well as advertising our existence to members close to retirement.

ACTION: MD to follow up initial conversations about the production of flags and then make them available to members taking action.

3) **Work on the transfer of working members retiring to membership of the RMA.** A flyer and membership form is already available on our webpage.

ACTION: MD to circulate the link to the flyer and form to all attendees and all to raise this in their branches.

4) **Improve the involvement of retired members in the wider movement.** The GMB is affiliated to the Labour Party, can affiliate to local Trades Union Councils, is active in the NPC, has its own networks including for black members, women and LGBT, the Committee has already raised with Alan Fraser (regional education officer) that RMA members could contribute their experience to trade union courses.

ACTION: Committee to investigate the following and circulate information to attendees for promulgation within their branches:

- Active engagement with the Labour Party
- GMB regional networks
- Affiliation to Trades Union Councils
- Participate in future Tolpuddle rallies (2023: 14-16 July)
- Engagement with the union's education programme
- Affiliation to the Regional TUC's pensioners networks/committees (two TUC regions are involved in our Region – South West, and London, Eastern, South East)

Close of meeting

The President thanked all those who attended, not only for their attendance but for their participation. The notes of the meeting will be made available to all attendees as soon as possible.

The Committee will next meet at the end of August/beginning of September, but much of the above can be begun now. Safe journey home everyone!