

Report of the Cardiff West General Committee (GC)- April 2018

This month, we had a guest speaker in the form Rob Jenks, the TSSA (Transport Salaried Staff's Association)'s Policy Officer. Rob discussed the topic of rail privatisation and the Wales and Borders Rail Franchise. He began by establishing the recent history around rail privatisation, including the 1993 Railways Act, which prevents public sector bodies from bidding for franchises. The Wales and Borders Franchise had begun life in 2001 and in December 2003 Arriva Trains Wales won the 15-year contract to provide the franchise. This will shortly come to an end, with the Welsh Government opening up the tendering process in October 2016.

Rob outlined the ways in which the myths behind the benefits of rail privatisation, particularly that it would provide cheaper, better service and lead to more investment) can be discredited. He outlined: the large increases in rail fares; the ways in which the UK Government seeks to push the costs of rail onto consumers; the large profits made by rail companies, including by those companies that lease out the rolling stock; and the domination of one company, and therefore lack of competition, given the nature of geography.

He then outlined the approach taken by the Welsh Government, following the outcome of the 2016 consultation which agreed to move on a 'not for dividend' business. The Transport for Wales body is a not for profit body, but apparent legal restrictions mean that the franchise will be run on a similar model of Transport for London, wherein even the maintenance and ownership on tracks will be open to privatisation. There are also concerns around the change from heavy to light track, which would prevent the transport of freight, alongside looking for subcontractors for rail enhancements. There are two current bidders, as two have backed out. Generally, Rob felt that there will little chance of this situation changing, but that did not mean that the unions and any so-minded party activists should not continue to put pressure on the Welsh Government. The GC noted these concerns and there were a number of comments and questions. The TSSA were praised for their excellent video on this topic and Rob was thanked for coming to address the GC.

Every month, we receive verbal reports from our elected representatives. This month, Mark (our AM) was unavailable, as he was in the Netherlands on ministerial business, so Kevin (our MP) and Peter Bradbury (one of our Councillors) gave verbal reports and took questions from members.

Kevin focussed on the developing situation in Syria and the then likelihood of the UK participating in US-led airstrikes on the Assad regime, following the latest reports of the use of chemical weapons. Kevin fully agreed with Jeremy Corbyn's principled stance on the issue, disagreed with military intervention and wanted to see the issue taken before Parliament for debate and vote. GC members contributed comments around arm sales to the region, the undermining of international organisations such as the International Criminal Court, the fact that we would now be participating in bombing both sides of the conflict and the impact on civilians, the impact of other interventions and those in other countries, the on-going refugee crises and the need for peace talks and political resolution. The overwhelming majority opposed military intervention and Kevin thanked the GC for their informative comments.

Next month, we will have another guest speaker, this time on the topic of proportional representation.