

FELA speech

Good afternoon comrades. FELA are the cool kids of the EIS, or maybe that should be the Enfants Terribles! It's a real honour to speak to you today, and I bring solidarity on behalf the lay members of the entire union.

As I've served my time as President this year, there have been several truths, that although I had always kind of known them, they have become more galvanised in my outlook. These are:

- Trade Unionism is about democracy in a way that transcends the democracy of Politics,
- Trade Unionism has the capacity to fight for Social Justice in a way that nothing else can, and
- The fight is never over, so the wins of each particular battle must be celebrated.

As you are aware, the teachers (or those on SNCT conditions), have just concluded their latest epic campaign on pay. The Pay Attention Campaign has been the most successful pay campaign for teachers that I certainly have ever

seen. It was the first time that our teachers had taken sustained strike action since the 1980s when we took on Margaret Thatcher and we won.

You don't need me to tell you that the UK has the most draconian strike laws in Europe, but the good thing about the anti TU legislation – if you really want to find it – is that it forces us as unions to really seek to engage our members and make sure that we are in touch with them. Whether you're fighting for pay or workload. The strength of the EIS lies in our ability to both listen to our members and lead them accordingly. Throughout the teachers' pay campaign, and really since the Value Education Value Teachers campaign from 2018, we've seen consistently high levels of turnouts in our ballots.

Strike action has been fairly new to the majority of teachers, but it hasn't been new to you. A lot of the strategies that we've used to build member engagement, like using social media in new and stronger ways, we've learned from you.

This year, we've seen attacks on that democracy. Despite us having sectoral bargaining, we've seen the First Minister try to pit us against non-teacher unions – saying that teachers were refusing to take the pay offer that the janitors in their schools have taken, and we've seen the Cabinet Secretary trying to pick off unions by commending the other teacher trade unions for calling off the strikes. But we, like you, were absolutely adamant, that our

members would decide when the strike action ended and our members would decide when the pay dispute was over.

If that wasn't enough, we saw Rishi Sunak and his Tory Government trying to strengthen the aforementioned Anti TU legislation. This is legislation, by the way that the SNP said they would repeal if we were independent, and Keir Starmer said Labour would repeal if they got into Westminster. But we saw SNP and Labour counsellors using everyone one of those laws to the letter when it came to our strike action, when COSLA wrote to local authorities telling them to discipline our members if they refused to cover the classes of striking teachers. As a union movement, in its widest sense, we will stand firm against the Tories on this, and defend our right to strike. We will not allow Rishi Sunak to finish the job that Margaret Thatcher began. It was a pleasure and a privilege to represent you when I spoke at the STUC Anti strike law demonstration in Buchanan Street.

Throughout my time as Vice President, and President, the fact that as Trade Unionists, we fight for Social Justice has become ever stronger and ever clearer.

As Trade Unionists, we truly represent people. We represent workers – who are vital to life itself. We represent those who provide food, shelter, care, transport and education. The pandemic showed exactly who was necessary in

society. The fact is that people care, and people care about people, and so I am proud of the fact that our AGMs and Councils regularly have a high concentration of social justice motions. The fact that we support Justice for Sheku Bayoh, we've shown solidarity with Afghanistan educators and Trade unionists, Colombian comrades, we continue to fight for better representation of minority ethnic groups in workplaces, climate change and so on and so on, is because our members get involved, and demand that the union gets involved. A lot of the most inspirational speeches come from FELA, and this isn't just what enriches our union. This **is** what the union is about.

I had the privilege of representing the EIS in Australia. Right now, Australian unions are leading the way to campaign that citizens in Australia vote YES in a referendum which will ensure that listening to the voices of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders is written into the Australian Constitution. Politicians may make changes, but trade unionism drives that change.

Finally, it's really important to realise that our fight is never over. For as long as humanity exists, there has always been, and there always will be something to struggle for. And even if we do reach utopia, that utopia will need to be maintained. As soon as the teachers won on pay, and yes, it was a win, then next came the struggle and the pain of trying to get our local authorities to pay the backpay, and the unhappy members when they realised they were going to

over-pay tax by about £400. And it's easy to get lost in that cycle, and to never feel that your job is done.

So I'm here today, to remind you of why we do this. Why FELA needs to keep at it.

First of all, following decades of plant bargaining across Scottish FE, EIS/FELA successfully gained National union recognition in 2014 - 15. FELA fought local disputes in Glasgow and Edinburgh to persuade those colleges to sign up to National Bargaining. Since then you have been on strike every year except one showing those college principals, who have never accepted that they are not feudal barons, that FELA cannot be ignored! This has helped to maintain your salaries at acceptable levels.

After two years of national disputes FELA won equal pay across the sector from Stornoway to Galloway, Greenock to Edinburgh and all points in between. This meant huge pay increases for those branches which had been badly served by local bargaining over past decades. In 2017/18 FELA embarked on the first "Honour the Deal" campaign to force college management to honour an agreement on pay. Not only did FELA win the industrial action campaign but also won an Employment Tribunal case on this issue.

Let me pause here. That action was what inspired and motivated teachers to organise for the VEVT pay campaign of 2018. We were standing on your shoulders when we were decked out on yellow. And when the Pay Attention campaign started, we were already cashing in on the engagement from that last campaign. So, the teachers of the EIS owe FELA a huge debt of gratitude. So thank you! Thank you!

Moving on...FELA successfully carried out national and local industrial action at Forth Valley College to win the reinstatement of lecturers at that college, and to gain a national agreement on the appointment of staff on lecturing conditions.

FELA has also agreed professional registration for lecturers with the GTCS, another long running policy objective.

Workload. Many colleges had no agreement on working hours, many worked 27 hours class contact per week. You won a maximum of 23 hours per week. You won an arrangement to make temporary staff permanent (and so drove out a lot of casualisation)

The National Working Practices Agreement established rights such as 7 hours per week off-site working in recognition that you are professionals. (GTCS registration came with it too).

2021 – you defeated fire and re-hire.

So, FELA, at your national conference, as you look forward to the work of the next year, pause, reflect and congratulate yourselves. Your struggle may be our struggle, but you're wins are our wins, and our wins are your wins!

You as activists are what drives these changes. Your members owe you a huge debt of gratitude. Campaigning works, and you know how to run campaigns.

I want to end on a personal note. Over the years, I personally have been inspired and motivated by FELA members, by your industrial action and determination to fight for injustice across the globe. For those of you who've taken the time to chat with me, and encourage me, and offer advice, thanks so much.

So FELA, on behalf of the wider membership, solidarity, and enjoy your conference!