FIGHTING TOGETHER
WINNING TOGETHER

Annual Conference 2026 - Day 1

300 plus POA delegates and visitors are in Eastbourne for the conference. The conference started with reports from the Standing Orders Committee and a minute's silence in tribute to members who passed away in the previous year.

The National Chair Mark Fairhurst welcomed delegates to the conference, saying how proud he was to be chair of the union. He went on to give a wide-ranging, passionate speech setting out the crisis facing the service, highlighting understaffing, overcrowding, rising levels of violence against staff, the threat from drones and contraband, the inadequate pay award delivered by the so-called Independent Pay Review Body, the injustice of the retirement age and the appalling ban on Prison Officers' right to strike.

Mark highlighted POA campaigns and victories - PAVA and PPE in the youth and female estates, Tasers and provision of stab vests. He called on the Government and HMPPS to invest in the service to end decades of cuts that have caused widespread damage to the service. He highlighted the personal strain and impact on Prison Officers' health and well-being, the shambolic handling of public sector pensions by the contractor CAPITA and the abject failure of privatised prison maintenance.

Mark called for the union to "Fight Together, to Win Together"

General Secretary, Steve Gillan, gave an extensive report of developments in the campaign to reinstate Prison Officers' Right to Strike. In March, the POA was advised that the European Committee on Social Rights had written a report which said that by banning the right to strike for Prison Officers, the UK was in breach of its obligations under the social charter. The POA has a case lodged on this at the European Court of Human Rights, which we hope will be heard soon. The POA is appalled that Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary, David Lammy, recently wrote to the union stating that the Labour Government would be defending in court the anti-union legislation introduced by a previous Tory Government. Steve said this was an appalling situation that the POA will challenge with every legal avenue available to the union.

Lord Timpson - Prisons Minister

In his speech, Lord Timpson paid tribute to the POA and Prison Officers across the country who are doing excellent work in a system under pressure. He spoke of the commitment of staff and progress made on a number of fronts as the government tries to address the legacy of decades of underinvestment. He spoke of his desire to see things change and said he is in it for the long term. However, on the key issues of pay, right to strike, retirement age, etc., he was, at best, noncommittal and at worst rejected the position put forward by the union. Under robust follow-up questioning from the chair, Lord Timpson appeared to have no authority to give commitments on the operation of the pay review body, a retirement age of 68 and the outrageous abuse of prison officers' human rights.

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EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS ACT FRINGE MEETING

At lunchtime, Thompsons Solicitors hosted a fringe meeting on the provisions of the Employment Rights Act, which is the biggest change in employment rights in a generation. It is a huge piece of legislation. There are 351 pages to the act. It brings in a number of changes to the law around unfair dismissal, fire and rehire, ends minimum service levels, introduces changes to paternity and maternity leave, duties on employers, tribunals times, union recognition etc. It must be noted however that amendments put forward to repeal section 127 of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act during the passage of the Bill, was rejected by the government

MENTAL HEALTH FRINGE MEETING

Joanne Forsyth, a postdoctoral researcher, presented her research findings on the mental health impact of being a Prison Officer. Working with the union, Joanne has developed a model of delivery for positive interventions to help the health and well-being of members. A pilot project will begin soon.

MICHELLE JARMAN HOWE'S SPEECH

Conference heard from Michelle Jarman Howe, Director of Operations HMPPS. Michelle spoke of her pride at having spent her working life in the service, saying, “Prisons were her life’s work.”

She spoke of the shared frustrations and challenges in the system. She said she was committed to the implementation of the Rademaker rort and spoke about implementing the IRIS system. She discussed her visits to different establishments and the 3000 spaces created through the early release of prisoners. She recognised the commitment of POA members, falling vacancy rates, record numbers of applicants, need to improve retention rates, etc. She said that improving safety and professional standards and prison regimes was her priority

Motions

- Debates began with a number of motions on rule changes
- Ceasing The Temporary Presumed Risk Assessment Process for prisoners being allocated to the open estate
- Duty Governors' presence at receptions
- SERCO’s failures on prisoner transfer
- Violence in the prison estate
- Adjudication system
- An NEC working group on Prison Violence
- OSG strike action and working conditions
- PPE for workshop officers
- Lone working in the open estate
- General alarms in open prisons
- PPE in the female estate
- The sentencing bill
- Equalities