

Address to STUC Special Congress
December 5th 2005

John Keenan, President STUC

Congress.

In some ways our gathering today is an historical event.

Never before has a Special Congress been convened to propose alterations to the STUC Constitution.

Rarely, if ever, has a President of the STUC had to make two addresses to Congress in one year.

Which means that rarely, if ever, has a President been called upon to chair two Congresses in one year – so go easy on me!

But Congress, this is most certainly NOT the first time that we have stood together and discussed change.

And, whichever route we ultimately decide, it is certainly not be the first time that we will have modernised our structures in order to meet the challenges of changing patterns of employment and amongst our own membership.

Congress, the largest number of delegates ever sent to STUC Congress was in 1983.

That Congress met just weeks before the 2nd Thatcher government was elected and proceeded to launch unprecedented attacks on the NHS, the economy, and public services, used unemployment as an economic policy and with messianic fervour tried to destroy the TU movement.

In 1983 we had over a million members. In that year the STUC General Council was elected from thirteen separate sections. Including section 6 - the clothing, boot shoe, leather, textile and pottery section.

In 1983, the coal industry provided nearly 20,000 STUC affiliated members. We had 58 affiliated unions, but only 26 members of the General Council.

And Congress, in 1983, of our 26 General Council members only three were women.

When STUC Congress met in 1997, here in Glasgow, just weeks before the final defeat of the Tories our membership had reduced by over 300,000.

The STUC had 11 fewer affiliated unions than in 1983 and the coal industry provided only a little over 3,000 of our affiliated membership.

The number of industrial sections had been altered to reflect the new reality of industrial Scotland with six sections.

We had recognised the key role played by young trade unionists with a new section created for young members. The STUC Youth Committee has continued to play a valuable role in our movement and on the General Council ever since.

And what of 2005?

When we met in Dundee earlier this year, Labour was on the cusp of an historic third term in government. The outright attacks on trade unionism have ceased. And some semblance of sanity has returned to economic and social policy in Scotland and across the UK.

The Scottish Parliament, which we fought for and won is approaching its third term.

And Congress, STUC membership has stabilised and has begun to grow again over the past few years.

Last year our membership rose by more than any year since 1979.

But while membership has grown, union mergers continue. We now have just 43 separate affiliates and that's fewer than we had in 1922.

The structure of the STUC's industrial sections has not changed since 1997. But the STUC has continued to reflect the growing diversity of our membership through the introduction of Black

Workers and Disabled Workers committee representatives on the General Council.

And Congress, whilst we should never be complacent, the level of representation of women on the General Council is unrecognisable from the days of 1983.

The current General Council has 42 members and that is something we are debating today.

Congress, some things have not changed in the past 20 years
Star Wars Films are still breaking box office records
Madonna is still getting to number 1
And Eddie Reilly is still a member of the General Council

But many other things have changed which is why unusual though it may be, this Special Congress continues a process, a process, which has never ceased. A process of modernising and updating our structures to meet the new challenges we face.

Over the past 20 years we have faced change after change.
Some of those changes we have fought and were right to fight.
The destruction of our coal and manufacturing base
The privatisation of key public services
The poll tax

But there are many other changes that we have fought to bring about.

A powerful Scottish Parliament,
The minimum wage
An end to the two tier workforce under new PPP contracts

And there are many battles that we continue to fight
For decent pensions for all our members
For a fair, and growing economy with a strong manufacturing base backed up by decent apprenticeships and 21st Century employment conditions
For equal pay through equal value to become a reality for all of our members.

Meanwhile affiliated unions offer services and opportunities to members of a breadth and quality we could not have imagined two decades ago.

We have professionalized the way we do business
We have diversified into new areas such as workplace learning
and bargaining for equality
And we have grasped the organising agenda, exemplified in the
STUC's own Unions Work Campaign.

Congress. When the General Council made the decision to
propose the Motion to amend the Constitution we did so in the full
knowledge that it would provoke discussion and debate.

One of the first actions of the General Council was to hand over to
the Standing Orders Committee full responsibility for the debate.

The procedure,
The format
And the conduct.

I believe that the work of the Standing Orders Committee has
enabled the most open and inclusive procedure possible under the
rules of this organisation.

Open debate and constructive criticism lies at the heart of our
movement and that is another thing, which has not changed in the
past 20 years.

Congress it has not changed in the past 110 years.

Congress, when we end our conference today our structure may
have changed, but our central goals will be the same.

We will continue to move forward as a progressive and unified
movement. A movement, which is growing again.

We will continue to work together at every level of this movement
to improve the lives of our members and wider society.

We will continue to hold true to the message that an injury to one
is an injury to all.

Congress let us have a good debate today, let us have a
constructive debate today and let us move forward from today
even more united than when we started.