

International trade union solidarity

by Stephen Smellie

UNISON Scotland's International Committee presented the Sam Macartney Award for International Solidarity to Stephen Smellie in February 2024.

The article below is based on Stephen's speech at the award event.



From left, Kaila McCulloch, Co-Chair of the International Committee with speakers Ugur, Emine, Stephen and Mohammed. Stephen, UNISON Scotland's Depute Convener, was [announced as the recipient](#) at the December 2023 Scottish Council. The award event at Glasgow City UNISON's office included speeches on solidarity with Kurdistan from Emine and Ugur, from the Kurdish Community Centre in Edinburgh, and the Sam Macartney Commemoration Lecture on Palestine solidarity, given by Mohammed Alazraq, representing the Lajee Centre, in Aida Refugee Camp, in the West Bank.

As a child brought up in East Kilbride, I visited the David Livingstone Centre in Blantyre as part of school and Sunday School trips. I would recommend a visit to it today as it helps to educate visitors not only on the life of David Livingstone, explorer and missionary, but also about the lives and challenges of people living in the countries of southern Africa, such as Malawi, during the 19th Century and today.

However, when I visited it as a child, (a long time ago!) the message was very clearly one of David Livingstone going to Africa to fight slavery, and to take civilisation and Christianity to the heathens of Africa – and they did use that word, heathen, to describe the indigenous people of Africa! Livingstone, we were told represented the great civilising power of Christian Great Britain and Queen Victoria.

That was the culture that my generation were brought up in. My trips to the David Livingstone Centre were my first introduction to the world outside my own little world of a white family and school in the west of Scotland.

As I grew older my world view was influenced by things happening in the world, some of which I would see on television.

I remember vividly, the reports of violence in Northern Ireland, of soldiers on the streets of places like Belfast and Londonderry (never Derry), of bombs and the IRA and their terrorist actions for a United Ireland.

I went to a Protestant school, sorry, a non-denominational school, but my mother was a Catholic and so the prevailing support, judged by the graffiti on desks supporting the UDA/UVF/UFF, jarred with my family circumstances and I had sympathies for the cause of the Nationalist people of Northern Ireland. That led to debates with school friends that were neither well-informed nor informing. But it planted a seed, that the reports of terrorism against innocent people were only a part of the story.

There were regular reports from Vietnam where the American military were fighting against a communist insurgency to overthrow democracy and names of the bad guys, like, Ho Chi Minh, became known.

Palestinian terrorists, including Leila Khalid hijacked and blew up airliners.

South Africa and protests against apartheid were also on the TV. Again, there were reports of terrorism by the African National Congress, the ANC, and pictures of Mandela, a convicted terrorist.

My mother told me what apartheid was and I took the side of the Black South Africans against the racist regime. I wore a badge, Victory to the Freedom Fighters, ANC, with the silhouette of a man holding aloft a rifle. Under today's laws in this country that would make me a terrorist!

Then I became a punk rocker and my life changed forever! I adopted the stance of The Clash -**anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-violence and pro-creative!**

On The Clash' album Sandinista! there was a song, Washington Bullets. It referred to the Bay of Pigs and Castro, Chile and the overthrow of Allende and the Sandinista led struggle in Nicaragua.

As every cell in Chile will tell, The cry of the tortured men. Remember Allende and the days before, before the army came. Please remember Victor Jara, in the Santiago stadium, Es verdas – those Washington bullets again!

The Bay of Pigs in 1961, Havana for the playboys in the Cuban sun. For Castro is a colour, is redder than red, those Washington bullets want Castro dead, For Castro is a colour that will earn you a spray of lead.

For the very first time ever, when they had a revolution in Nicaragua. There was no interference from America, Human Rights from America. Well the people fought the leader, and up he flew. With no Washington bullets, what else could he do?

Sandinista!

Joe Strummer's lyric exposing American imperialism was really influential. It made it clear to me that these different issues and causes were related. But it wasn't just US imperialism.

And if you find an Afghan rebel that the Moscow bullets missed, ask him what he thinks of voting communist. Ask the Dalai Lama in the hills of Tibet, how many monks did the Chinese get? In a war-torn swamp stop any mercenary, check the British bullets in his armoury. Que?

Sandinista!

The struggle for civil rights in Northern Ireland, Nelson Mandela and the ANC's struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the Vietnam War, the Palestine issue, and more, were all linked to Imperialism of the past.

I had been brought up in classrooms with maps of the world where a quarter of the countries were pink, denoting British. At primary school we had learned of Clive of India, who helped bring India into "our" empire.

Of course by then, I had lived through the fun of candle light during the 3 day-week when the miners had fought against a Tory government, of the Winter of Discontent when unions in the public sector refused the Labour government's, IMF backed austerity, the rise of the National Front demanding the expatriation of Asians and West Indians back to their "own" countries, the ones that were pink on the school map that we had been told were "ours." And then Margaret Thatcher, who echoed similar racist views and told us that the miners were the enemy within, and that Mandela was, indeed, a terrorist.

All of these issues were and remain linked. The struggle for decent pay and to save jobs here is linked to the struggle for a living wage and jobs in other parts of the world. The fight to protect democratic rights in the UK, to be able to join a trade union and take strike action, to be able to take to the streets to protest, all of which are under threat today, are the same fight for democratic rights that Mandela fought for in South Africa, that Allende was murdered for in Chile and that the Palestinians have been fighting for the past 100 years since Britain decided to support a

colonialist, settler project to remove the resident Palestinian people to make way for people coming from Europe.

The struggles that we in our trade unions are engaged in are the same as elsewhere in the world and as we would ask for solidarity, for support, when we are on strike or campaigning to stop cuts, we should extend solidarity to those workers across the world engaged in the same struggles.

This is not the same as charity. Charity is where you help someone who is suffering by giving them food, water or medicines, or donate money to help them get these essentials. Solidarity is a trade union principle that is about providing assistance to allow people to stand on their own feet and fight for themselves so that they are more powerful and can change their situation, for freedom, justice and a future free from oppression.

There is the saying, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, Teach him how to fish and he can feed himself for a lifetime.” Trade union solidarity takes that a step further by advocating that we support the fisherman and his comrades to take over the fishery and the market where he sells his fish, and the means of distribution and they can not only live off fish but use the income to build schools and hospitals and be able to ensure that the benefits are shared in a free and democratic society.

I am pleased that our Scottish International Committee is developing a project to support trade unions in Malawi, to help them to be able to advocate for workers, campaigning for the social protections such as health care, education, housing and social security, in a Just Transition from a fossil fuel imperialist society to a low carbon, fairer and more Just society in the post-colonial world that they, and we, inhabit. That gives me a link right back to my visits to the David Livingstone Centre as a child!

How do we know whose side to take and what to do when confronted with issues that are complex and challenging?

Bob Fulton is one of the heroes of the Rolls Royce workers in East Kilbride who decided to boycott the Chilean air force engines that were in the factory for refurbishment and repair. These engines were used in the coup against the democratically elected government of Allende, referred to earlier by Joe Strummer. Their trade union solidarity with the workers of Chile against the fascist dictatorship of General Pinochet, grounded much of the Chilean air force and saved many lives. Their story was made famous in the film *Nae Pasaran*.

In a Q&A after a showing of the film in East Kilbride, a shop steward at the factory pointed out that they still get engines to repair from repressive regimes, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. He asked the *Nae Pasaran* veteran, what should we do in these circumstances?

Bob Fulton, in his 90s, thought and then replied, “You should do the right thing.”

International trade union solidarity is about standing up for workers, supporting their struggle for justice, for jobs, for democracy and equality. It is, as Bob Fulton said, about doing the right thing.

So, when Russia invades Ukraine, we stand by the Ukrainians.

When Israel attempts genocide in Gaza, we stand with the Palestinians.

When Turkey, uses British made weaponry to attack the Kurdish people in Rojava, we say ban arms sales to Turkey and stand by the Kurds.

UNISON has always stood with the Palestinians. The union has had regular delegations to Palestine, our colleagues in Northern Ireland support the Lajee Centre in the Aida Refugee camp. UNISON funds projects in the West Bank representing Palestinian workers and advocating for their legal rights. We called for a ceasefire from the beginning of current Israeli collective punishment of the people of Gaza. We call on the next Labour government to recognise Palestine as a state.

In recent years we have offered solidarity to Turkish health union SES and the KESK and DISK trade union confederations as they are prosecuted and jailed for speaking up against Turkey's war against the Kurds and for peace and democracy.



UNISON 2022 [conference hears](#) a passionate speech from KESK, the Turkish Confederation of Public Service Workers: "Democracy and peace are equal to bread and water." Hundreds of delegates raised 'Free Gonul' signs in solidarity with Gonul Erden, a former co-president of SES and one of the Turkish trade union leaders imprisoned in the country on terrorism charges. General Secretary Christina McAnea attended a day of her trial. Gonul was [released](#) in 2023 but remains under [house arrest](#).

When the World Cup was being planned for Qatar, UNISON funded projects to help organise the migrant workers from the Philippines who were building the stadiums

and hotels and continue to support them in getting government support for a Migrant Workers' Resource Centre.

UNISON supported the peace efforts in Colombia by supporting trade unions and women's groups, whose leaders were targeted by right-wing militias. We have supported Cuba's struggle for an end to the illegal blockade imposed by the USA which stops medicines reaching the Cuban people.

The common struggle to stop climate change is another area where our interests are common with those across the world and where our solidarity is needed.

When the former imperialist powers of Britain, the USA and Europe continue to benefit from centuries of burning fossil fuels, so building up their economies, infrastructure, economic and military power, at the expense of the Global South who are in the frontline of climate change that the rich countries have caused, we stand whilst attending COP meetings and through Public Services International, with the Global South and their demands for Loss and Damage funds to assist them to both mitigate against the use of fossil fuels and to adapt to the effects of climate change.

We offer our solidarity, not as aid, although aid in disasters is crucial, but as assistance to help them in their struggle, to give them greater power and to help us in our struggles so that we can all build a better, fairer, more equal and democratic world.



Sam Macartney was recognised in an [Early Day Motion](#) in February 2020 in the House of Commons, tabled by Chris Stephens MP:

“That this House recognises the life and work of Sam Macartney, a UNISON activist for 35 years, who died on the 24 January 2020; recognises his work as a Senior Steward within Glasgow's learning disability day care services, and the Conditions of Service Officer within the Glasgow City Branch of UNISON; and sends condolences to his family at this time; recognises his work as the Chair of the UNISON Scotland International Committee, alongside his international work within the UK Trade Union and the Scottish Trades Union Congress; further recognises his work on Palestine, Venezuela, Cuba, Southern Africa, the industrial disaster in Bhopal, India, which he visited in 2014 to mark its 30th Anniversary, and campaigner for the Kurdish people; celebrates his work in his trade union activities; and recognises the esteem in which he was held by his many friends and colleagues; and offers condolences to all who knew him at this time.”

Sam is pictured, centre, with International Committee Co-Chairs Kaila McCulloch and Tony Caleary.