

INTERVIEW FOR BRITAIN AT WORK – YOUNG WORKERS PROJECT 2020

Paul Valentine 6th May 2020 interviewed by TUC Librarian Jeff Howarth

Paul Valentine is currently the Chair of PCS Southbank, and the Young Members Councillor on Equity. He trained as an actor. He was elected onto the Young Members Committee as Vice-Chair, then as Young Members Councillor on Equity's main governing body. As well as acting Paul works front of house at Southbank Centre. Paul describes all this work and how he has been instrumental in changing the work-practices at both branches of Equity and PCS and been very successful at recruiting, especially young members. He has recently been successfully involved in establishing an Equity Fringe contract with a theatre company for a tour. He also describes the impact of Covid-19 on his working and trade union life.

Jeff Howarth: If we can start..Tell me your name.

Paul Valentine: So I'm Paul Valentine,

Jeff Howarth: And today's date?

Paul Valentine: and what is today's date? It's the 6th of May, 2020

Jeff Howarth: Thanks Paul. If you could tell me when you left school and what your first job or jobs were?

Paul Valentine: So, um, I left school in... 2006, it would have been. So I'm literally, I'm, I'm just coming out of being young worker actually, where we're sort of on the, the last, the last cusps of being kind of electable into the young workers bracket. But, yeah, 2006 is when I left, um, secondary school. When I went on to university then, but during, I mean, between 2004 and 2006, I was at our, our sixth-form, um, at my school, but I also had, a Saturday job there as well. So my first job back in it must have been 2004, I think, was with Martin's the newsagent. So I was just working, behind the counter stacking all the sort of stuff that you'd expect in the newsagents. And then shortly after that, about a year later, I moved down the road and got a job in F Heinz, the jewellers. So just another shop down our high street. And again, it was, it was working behind the counter, but I mean it was a little bit more interesting cause we were, we were selling jewellery and watches and stuff like that. So it was, I mean it was still essentially customer service roles.

Jeff Howarth: Great, so can you tell me what degree did you do?

Paul Valentine: So at university I did a degree in drama. Yeah.

Jeff Howarth: So tell me about your sort of, your journey into the trade union world and what jobs you were doing at the time.

Paul Valentine: Yeah, sure. So, trade union world involvement was a little bit later on. Because certainly when I first I guess entered the world of work, I didn't know anything about unions at all. If you'd ask me what a trade union was back in sort of 2004 to 2006 when I'm working as a shop assistant and I wouldn't have had any idea at all and I'm not even sure my colleagues would have done. There certainly wasn't any kind of discernible workplace reps or anything like that or anyone sort of banging the drum for the union movement. So I went off to uni in 2006, between 2006 and 2009, down in Bristol and I did my drama degree there. And again, I had some, I had some part time work while I was at university. I worked in a jewellers down in Bristol shopping centre as well as some more customer service stuff. And I would do some student ambassador work for the university as well, which was like going into schools and talking about like further education and all that sort of stuff. But again, these, these worlds of work, there was no, there was no mention of anything to do with trade

unions at that time either. So it wasn't until 2010 that I started to, to tentatively find out about the union movement. And it was by accident really, because I did my BA honors, in Bristol doing drama. And then I decided in that sort of three year period where I kind of grew up a bit as well, that I did want to pursue acting. So in order to do that, the best thing to do was to try and get a place at drama school proper. And I, I came back in 2009 I auditioned for drama school in 2009 and I didn't actually get in, which is just as well actually because I wouldn't have been able to afford it anyway. So I had a whole, I had a whole year out working as well and I worked front of house at the theatre. Which actually, thinking back on it, it's surprising actually that, that period, that one year in 2009 I didn't find out anything about unions cause usually in sort of front of house at the theatre they tend to be relatively strong. Maybe they've just got stronger over the last sort of 10 years or so. But either way I was, I was focusing on work at that period, got into drama school in 2010 and it was a two year postgraduate course and you do your, you do your acting course and there's kind of a given I guess in the acting world that you join Equity and loads of people have heard of having the, having an Equity card for example. And I got my Equity card because I went to drama school. But again, I didn't really know that it was a trade union thing. I knew it was something to secure my professional stage name and I knew it sort of gave me some sort of acting related protection. But I didn't really know how that all kind of tied in with, with anything else. So in, when I did graduate in 2012 and I got obviously got my Equity card, you get a load of sort of welcome pack and all that sort of stuff saying thanks for joining and it gives you a bit of an indication of how you can get involved. So I thought, not coming from a non performing background at all, I didn't really have perhaps some of the contacts that, that my other friends and colleagues from, from drama school times did. Cause you often find that in drama schools that cause it's, it's full of, cause it's so expensive. There are a lot of people who can just afford to go on a whim and often have connections to the industry and all that sort of stuff. So I thought, well actually I don't have any connections. I want to meet people, I want to try and I, this is my career now. I need to sort of immerse myself into it. So I found out about local branch meetings. My local branch is South and Southeast London, which at the time used to meet at the National Theatre. So I was like, yeah, well let's go along to one of these meetings. Let's meet some people, pick their brains, find out as a, as a young actor, what this is all about that I'm kind of entering into.

And I went along to one of their meetings and it was, it was all right, but it was a little bit boring (LAUGHS). And, I seem to remember that, I mean, they had guest speakers, which sometimes were very interesting, like they'd invite, I don't know, theatre directors along or people who could potentially in the future maybe give you jobs or give you work. And that section was interesting, but the rest of it was it just a little bit dull. And it was, it was a certain demographic of people, a certain age demographic, a certain ethnicity demographic. And I do remember, I just think at the time, I was like, well, this isn't very representative of South London. There's, I know it. It's surely this, this can't be it. And so I went to a few meetings, got to speaking to them.

I got the classic, this is something that every young worker will tell you, is that if you come along to a union meeting that's full of people of a certain age and certain demographic, you're kind of leeches onto straight away cause it's like, Oh youth, brilliant (LAUGHS) sort of bring the youth in. It's that you get that sort of thing, which, which actually at the time I didn't, know, nowadays because I've got so used to it, you sort of roll your eyes a bit when it happens, but at the time, because it was a first time thing, I was like, okay fine, I'll try and help if I can. And that's when I realized that they didn't have things like a social media presence or a branch email address or, or silly little things like that. It was all a bit sort of very old school trade unionism that the newsletter goes out in the post and then people would turn up and that kind of vibe.

And I said, well, if you want to change your demographic you're going to have to change your ways of thinking around this as well. So I ended up being elected onto the branch committee, as the kind of PR person. I mean that's what sort of seven or eight years ago now, but even then there were still, people were still engaging with all the various social media channels and all that sort of stuff. It wasn't, it wasn't exactly a new thing back then either. The branch was just a bit behind. So we did all of that stuff and it worked and we started to get a different demographic of people. But for me, the kind of payoff, if you like, was that by getting more involved in the committee and my sort of sole purpose is to sort of drum up support and get people to come along.

I then started to get sort of asked to come along on union related activities. So for example, I can't remember what year it was. It was probably 2013. Might have been the end of 2012, 2013, somewhere around there. There was one of these big anti-austerity marches. Now I'd never been or really understood or heard anything about an anti-austerity march before. But now I was on the committee. I was like, well, yeah, go on. Then I'll come along. And, I think as I said to you in the email as well, I sort of got invited along to this anti-austerity march. I'd been out the night before so I was a little bit worse for wear and I got given this flag sort of shoved in front of me, saying go on wave that, that's the Equity flag.

We now are going to go for a walk. And I was sort of, it was all a bit like, Oh, what's going on? What's going on? But really at that point is when I started to kind spoke to people on that March and in branch meetings and the more I kind of learned myself through the fact that it was difficult to get into the acting industry itself because I've realized how privileged a lot of people are that get into drama school and all that sort of stuff. And I needed a grant to get in that sort of payoff. It was kind of squaring the circle at that point and I thought, Oh, I understand now why there's this kind of movement, towards people unionizing and just being a collective to bargain for pay and conditions. But just sort of having that extra support so you don't feel you're alone, which really ties in with the acting world because obviously a lot of people do. You do end up feeling a bit alone when you're sort of sitting at your emails waiting for an agent to call or whatever, all those sort of cliches. So in itself, Equity kind of had that nice community feel to it. And then you couple on top of everything else your own experience and other people's experiences. And I suppose that's what sort of sold me into the union movement. Really.

Jeff Howarth: Fantastic. Can you tell me a bit about your background. In your email you talk about, sort of, Bromley being quite conservative

Paul Valentine: Yeah, sure. So, yeah, my background is kind of is, as I grew up in Orpington, which is in Bromley Borough and, I mean, Bromley Borough is a very, well, it is, it's a completely Conservative blue borough. But I suppose as a borough it like, well, like every London borough really it reflects the sort of the haves and have nots in its demographic. And I mean where we were in Orpington I would say we were sort of more in the kind of working class Conservatism bracket rather than, although again Orpington's the same, I mean one side of the station, it's very much sort of million pound plus houses. And where we were was up by the estate and I wasn't quite on the actual estate but my school's catchment area was the estate itself and we were in a sort of three bed semi.

It was that kind of catchment area. But either way it didn't really matter. I mean that's the funny thing that whatever side of the railway tracks you're on, you are going to be voting Conservative. Orpington's always, well pretty much has always been Conservative and it might've flirted with Liberal Democrat like back in the sixties or seventies or something. But certainly Bromley as a whole is a very blue borough. So voting, it was just kind of always the given that everyone votes Conservative cause that's the way it is. And which is what I did

back in 2010 so which makes sense actually. Cause that was before I'd really found out about Equity and unions and how that all ties in politically. And I sort of, I just put the X in the Conservative box cause I was still living back in Orpington without any real kind of thought behind it.

There was sort of, I mean it was good in a way that at least I, I knew I had, I should vote and engage with voting, but it wasn't really engagement by any stretch of the imagination because it was just that it was just the done thing, which makes sense because if you look at the voting statistics in Orpington and Bromley and beyond, it's massively skewed towards Conservative. There's barely any opposition really in any, any borough at all. So everyone's sort of feeding off that narrative I think.

No, there's no history of trade unions in my family at all, that I can think of. No, I don't. There's been no kind of, cause you do, you do find that in, in the union movement and in political circles as well, that often people have got some sort of family connection into it. But not mine. This is why my story's a weird sort of fluke in a lot of ways actually. Because there's no political background. There's no left-wing activism that I particularly know of anywhere. Everyone's just being quite sort of, I mean vote conservative, but I suppose with a small C like it's not like anyone was ever a party member or anyone particularly engaged politically. Like it wasn't a sort of, it wasn't like drummed into you either way actually.

There was just no real sort of, in fact, probably a lot of the time there's probably a lot of apathy like there is with amongst voters as well, that you sort of, follow the herd and vote for whoever everyone else is voting for, but you don't really engage with it because that's kind of the narrative. I'm sure it'd be the same now if you walked around that estate and said, "so what'd you think of politicians"? Everyone would go "yuch", I wouldn't want that conversation. And that's the way it is. Even my friends now that I talk to them about the union movement and my involvement in politics and stuff like that, they're sort of, pleased that I've evolved but that I don't think they really care. Like certainly my Orpington friends, they're a bit sort of, some of them are a bit apathetic to it, but that's because they've had it drummed into them really that politics is apathy. I think.

Jeff Howarth: Great. We talked about recruitment in your branch, how many people were attending the meetings? And you talked about being almost the only young person there in the union. And your success in recruitment. Have you succeeded in getting young people?

Paul Valentine: Yeah. Yeah. Very much so. I mean if you compare, compare the South and Southeast London branch, when I first went to meetings in late 2012 (EXHALATION OF BREATH) I would say, I mean it obviously it fluctuates to an extent, but there would probably be a maximum of 10 people would come along. And the meeting room that we were in was very much sort of boardroom meeting style. The demographic tended to be middle to older, aged, white male. That was, that was pretty much it. There was our chair back then who's actually still chair of the branch. Fiona. She was, she's a bit of a sort of trailblazer like I am as well. Cause I think she also joined maybe a little bit before me but also I think identified the fact that it was heavily white, white male, middle, middle to older age. And she wanted to change it as well, which is probably actually why, although we joke about the fact that you get these sort of branches that say all youth quickly, let's leech onto it. I think probably with Fiona it was a case of, Oh well there's someone else who's from a slightly different demographic. That's important because that's what I want to change as well. So back then, it must have been, yeah it must've been about maximum 10 people.

But if you skip forward to now in 2020 with Fiona is still the chair. I'm on the committee but I'm not as involved now because I'm more involved in national Equity stuff as I've sort of moved into other branch to the union or other parts of the union rather. But certainly nowadays we will come along to meetings. It could be at least double that, if not more, depending on the guest speaker. The demographic is, has changed. That's the most exciting thing is that is the demographic change, that we will now have like people of colour in our meeting. The age range, I won't be the youngest anymore. There will always be someone, one or two people who are, who are younger just coming into the union. There'll be more people who are female or, or don't identify as male, you know, it's all that sort of all that difference.

And it was a sort of gradual change, but we realized we sort of started to just appeal to more demographics by running workshops and, we did a good one actually, just before all, all this lockdown happened. We had a whole meeting centred around deaf and disabled artists in the union. And we met at the Young Vic Theatre now. And yeah, the whole, the whole meeting was signed and it was just all those sorts of things. And that just wouldn't have happened eight years ago. So, yeah, it's been really, it's really nice to see it, see it change and morph. I think that that might be indicative of the union as a whole, actually. I think they've realized how important it is to try and as much as possible to diversify the membership that you've got engaging

Jeff Howarth: Can you tell me a bit more about recruitment then? You said workshops. I think it's possibly a problem, you know, for the whole union movement faces in terms of trying to persuade young people of their relevance and, to shake off, as you say, like an older image. Can you tell me the sort of methods you use? And maybe even the, sort of, language you might use?

Paul Valentine: Yeah, sure. So when we were trying to sort of get young members to join and recruit, I mean Equity as well. I would preface it by saying that Equity is a funny one because the nature of our union, there's a big churn in work, whereas a lot of the more traditional unions, you're in your workplace, you join your union, then you have your branch meetings to talk about the issues in that workplace. Whereas a lot of the time in Equity, you're coming to meetings while you're out of work to keep your fingers in the pie as it were. So, the workforce churn is a, is a lot more different. And we have to have branches via geographical locations rather than workplace locations because again, the churn is so much. But what that did allow us recruitment wise was to kind of pitch our meetings to the world of work. So what we would do is invite guest speakers to either speak or run workshops that ultimately could potentially give members jobs.

So we, we would run workshops led by artistic directors of theatres or directors of theatre companies, it doesn't even necessarily have to be theatre. It could be film directors. It could be audio directors or casting directors as well, that do the whole brush because that's what essentially young actors or young creatives... cause actually that's the other thing. I should also say that a mistake we often make about Equity of course, is that it's not just actors that Equity represents, it's creative professionals. So sometimes we might have, if we've got a director along, yes. All right. That'll be interesting for actors, but also it'd be interesting for directors to find out how they navigate their path in the, in the creative industry or stage management or dancers or all that sort of stuff feeds it.

So we would run workshops or invite the various guest speakers along and people would come because they would see it as their opportunity to network in effect. So it was very, very much a networking exercise, at the forefront. And then we'd kind of take the same approach that ended up sort of recruiting me in a lot of ways in that. Yeah. "All right, come along to a

branch meeting because we are your community and where we can support each other". But then on top of that for the rest of the meeting, we need to talk about pay and conditions and recruitment and retention. This is what our union meeting is about. This is why we exist. This is the fun bit with the casting director, but also there's this section of it as well that actually if we all pulled together, our conditions across the whole industry will be, will be better for everyone.

So it was kind of a, I guess it was kind of a two pronged attack, um, in that respect. And then of course all of this was advertised on social media, on email newsletters, all the ways that, that I know that I would engage with the branch through online rather than paper newsletters, which people just tend to sort of hardly read it or might not even be signed up to receive. And that was really our way into recruitment. And then once we'd done that, people would then, who'd come along, start to invite their friends along. So that would kind of have a cumulative effect in that respect. And it works really as long as they had a name attached to them, be that from a theatre or casting or stage management or whatever.

We could pitch it to the right people. And people would come along because they would want to meet these people who have already had a modicum of success in the industry and pick their brains. And obviously in the back of their minds they'd be thinking, Oh yeah, maybe in the future I could work with this person and it could offer me employment as well, which actually works. Cause I mean, one of the meetings I went along to, I actually ultimately got a job out of it, but one of the guys came along and he ran a theatre company and I just kept in touch and I ended up working for him. So it does. Yeah. That worked. And that story was enough to persuade people to come along as well. I said, well, there's no guarantee, this isn't a job shop, exactly, but it's certainly a big selling point for Equity. And we have a whole section at the beginning of the meeting where we go around and everyone introduces themselves and if anyone's got any information they want to share in relation to jobs, people do that as well. So you've kind of got that element of community to it as well. I don't know whether there's a stereotype in the industry that once you hear about a job, you sort of sit on it so that there's no other competition. It's not like that at all in the union meeting where it's sort of like, if you hear something, I mean, more often than not, any way jobs are quite broad, so everyone's casting is slightly different. So you come in and you share it with everyone. And all that element of sharing has been really sort of positive in engaging with members and young members alike.

Jeff Howarth: Fantastic. It sounds almost revolutionary really. Incorporating technology and getting people to engage and think differently. You told me, you're, you're very much involved in PCS at Southbank. Please tell us about that. Have you used the same model, or similar as you can for PCS in recruitment.

Paul Valentine: Well, it's actually interesting comparing my involvement with PCS and Equity because it's,

TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION

Paul Valentine: Yeah, sure. So yeah, it's, yeah, it's interesting actually comparing PCS, the approach at PCS versus the, the approach at Equity. because essentially once I'd done all my Equity stuff, it was a couple of years down the line I was like, okay, I agree with all this, this union stuff now. So the Southbank is essentially my day job working in front of house at the Royal Festival Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall and Hayward Gallery and I thought, well, the union there was already relatively strong, so people would, who are reps would come round and say, yeah, you should join. And because I'd done a load of Equity stuff, I thought, yeah, I'll get involved in that. So I joined online and I think at the time there were a couple of

reps but it wasn't a full on sort of committee structure that it could be now at PCS Southbank. One of the other guys who is now the secretary who was the branch organizer at the time asked me if I wanted to be a rep in the workplace cause he, I think he probably knew about the Equity stuff as well. So I was like, all right, well go on then. Yeah, I'll be rep for you cause I'm getting a bit more knowledge about that, how the union movement works now.

But again, it's a really interesting one, PCS and especially contrasting it with Equity because it's very much, there's a lot of traditional elements to it in the sense that we are in a fixed workplace and you can join the union because you work in said fixed workplace. But equally because of the nature of the role that we do front of house, a lot of the members are classified as young members. Now obviously every union defined a young member slightly differently as well because at Equity, it's 30 and under and at PCS it's 27 and under. But anyway, that's by the by. A lot of our demographic anyway in the PCS branch, certainly from the front of house side of things was younger and then when it hit production they tended to perhaps be a little bit older. When it came to recruitment there it isn't like the monthly branch meetings that we have with Equity. What I realized there quite quickly was that because you're actually in a fixed workplace, in order to, to recruit people, it was all about showing those people that you're there for them to talk to and that you're there, that you're not afraid to speak up about any ills that are happening at work. You're not afraid to speak to the managers about that. You just had to show a little bit of, sort of onus that you were, you were there for those members. So that's kind of how we started to work it I think. And there was a lot of, it was a bit more traditional organizing in the sense that you'd go around with the slip of paper saying, "yeah, join PCS", but a lot of it was quite conversational.

Now the other funny thing about Southbank PCS Branch is because it's an art centre, I tend to find it's perhaps less persuasion to get people to join because there is this whole sort of lefty/arty artistic narrative anyway, that runs through.

So a lot of people would just hear about PCS on the recruitment day and they'll just join automatically without any sort of recruitment needed, which is very, very nice. But otherwise I would be sort of going around, I mean, especially in the front of house team as well when I was, I was rep rather than just chair of the whole branch. I mean, it's the same to an extent now because we're quite a close knit team. These colleagues actually just become your friends because it's the nature of that sort of job. And a lot of us are actors, artists, musicians, anyway, so a lot of it was about building that rapport, just from being friends in the workplace. And then when your new recruits came in, because obviously there's quite a high churn in front of house. The new recruits were coming in and then the older people would say, Oh yeah, no, you should, you should speak to Paul. He's the rep. And then you'd end up making friends with them and then you'd persuade them to join.

So a lot of it was almost more personal. And in a lot of respects. Equity gets the sort of personalization from when people do join up to the branch meetings. But with PCS because you're on the ground in the workplace, it's there. So we'd recruit by that sort of rapport. And then we realized as well that because our branch membership was swelling quite nicely, that it was time to put some events on rather than branch meetings. And because we're in the Royal Festival Hall, we had event space already. And as a branch we're allowed to book the event spaces if there's no sort of artistic or commercial activity happening.

So we organize some film screenings that have sort of happened in the last couple of years and they'd be [PAUSE] what's the, I'm forgetting the names of the films now. Kind of like, it's Ken Loach isn't it? That does a lot of the union kind of films.

[JEFF SUGGESTS "I DANIEL BLAKE"]

Yeah, I think we had "I, Daniel Blake" screening. So it was choosing those sorts of films and then inviting along guest speakers involved in those had an effect. I think. Yeah. "I, Daniel Blake" is the one with the civil, yeah, the social services involved in that isn't it? I think, I think that's, "I Daniel Blake" because PCS is known for being the union for civil servants. but it does have a cultural sector which involves a lot of the museums.

So actually putting those two things together was quite useful cause we managed to get some, I think we got some maybe guest speakers who were involved in that sort of benefit side of things. And I think we even got someone who was involved in the film, I can't remember now. It was a couple of years ago. Ordered in a load of pizzas as well. Use the Southbank technology. So we had a massive screen because obviously the Royal Festival Hall being what it is, has the technology already and the people in production who've got the skills to set it up are union members. So everyone was just sort of pooling their resources. Those of us who worked front of house, could quite easily manage to get everyone to sit down in a chair [LAUGHS]. So it was a real sort of resource pool.

It was just nice to organize the event and then again, that kind of raised the profile of the union because you have your AGM at PCS, but you don't really exactly need branch meetings every month. You just need to be there as an ever present. And I think that's the most important thing when it comes to organizing in a fixed workplace. Because meetings do bore the hell out of everyone [LAUGHS], especially when you're a younger person sitting in a meeting that's got a rigid agenda that feels like it's come out of the seventies. I've been in those meetings before, where the paper of the agenda comes around, even the typeface looks like it's been typed on a typewriter. It's that sort of a vibe. It is a complete turnoff. Like that's, I've been, this is one of my big things in a lot of union activism work, is that, as much as possible. I know people need agendas and I know we need to sort of have an idea of what we're going to talk about in various meetings, but this old school, "there must be a fixed rigid agenda! There must be a chair! and a vice chair and there must be all that!" All this sort of rigid activism is a little bit in the past.

Everything's far more collaborative nowadays. People feed in what they want to feed in. people want to socialize and then through socializing, that's when you'll get to the nub of any problems that people are having. And then you'll be able to say, "Oh, I can help you out with that". Or "Oh, that doesn't sound too nice. How does that make you feel? Oh, not very nice at all. Okay, well here's my experience in chatting to management. Um, perhaps I can give you a hand". All that sort of stuff. It's, it just makes things a little bit more sociable I think.

Jeff Howarth: I think you touched on the problems people have in the workplace, can you tell me about any workplace issues, any bad practices, any industrial disputes you've come across or been involved in? And whether unions have helped?

Paul Valentine: Um, let's have a think. I've always said about certainly my involvement with PCS at Southbank, it being quite a supposedly arty and right on institution anyway. We're always, I think pushing the ceiling a bit more than a lot of other PCS branches or perhaps a lot of other unions, which I actually think is quite exciting to trailblaze. Because I used to be a rep in the front of house department, but I'm now chair of the entire union. So I go along to the meetings with HR and management for the entire centre, and whereas just as an example, a lot of unions will be fighting for their workers to achieve the London Living Wage, for example, which is a big and very important fight to be had. Whereas we've already achieved that. We've already got the London Living Wage. So the next job on top of that is to

work out, all right, everyone's got the, at least the London Living Wage, but what about people's working hours? What about people's mental health, all that, all that sort of stuff, which is kind of often seen as as bonuses in the union, the union movement, a kind of a little sort of like, Oh yeah, well it'd be nice if we get that, but it's a bit of a bonus. We've already onto the kind of bonus level as it were, which is exciting itself. I think that also has helped our recruitment and especially attract young members because obviously mental health is a big thing at the moment and that's what people especially young members have been talking about. So when we're able to say that we, for example we feed into the Southbank's wellbeing network, we've achieved the Living Wage, which goes a long way to helping people's finances, which ties into mental health. There's all those sorts of things I think in PCS that kind of tie in. So, it's nice that we feel like we're one step ahead in that respect.

Equity wise, I would say, Equity very much deals or certainly for me have helped me deal with low paid work a lot. So for example, I took on a tour last summer and they were, we worked it out actually, the amount of hours we'd done in relation to the contracted pay was less than minimum wage, for example, which [LAUGHS DRYLY] which was not acceptable. Luckily everyone in my cast, we were a cast of eight people, including me. Everyone was already a union member, which was great. I didn't have to do any recruitment, and all of them are young members as well.

So already it showed to me that as a whole, Equity must be doing something right. Because normally there's one or two people in every cast in every workplace, probably that won't be a union member or you try and persuade them cause the others are. But everyone was a union member and everyone straight away said "No, this is not acceptable", which was really, really positive. And because I've done a lot of work with Equity and I've been on the young members committee and I'm now the young members councillor, I naturally had those immediate links to the right members of staff. So we got in contact with Charlotte at Equity who is the Low Pay, No Pay officer who I know very, very well through Young Members' involvement. And also we got to know the regional organizer because the company's based up in Lincolnshire, so there's a regional organizer for that area as well.

We all liaise together and we managed to get some more money out of the theatre company, which was important in itself. We kind of, we've obviously pushed the agenda forward because both Charlotte and our regional organizer before this Covid stuff [COVID-19] kicked off. They'd pretty much negotiated a deal to get this theatre company on the Equity fringe agreement, which ensures everyone is paid minimum wage. It ensures that they're paid weekly, which wasn't happening as well. Sometimes we'd get a trickle of money, then we get a bit more and it was all a bit sort of, it was impossible to plan anything. So that was quite exciting to hear that because I think, I mean now obviously no theatre is running at all. But had none of this Covid stuff happened then that theatre company summer season that would have taken place this summer, everyone on that season would have been on Equity contracts, which would have given them so much more peace of mind. So, like I said, it was really refreshing to find, without any kind of recruitment at all, that maybe, all the work that myself and my furlough activists have been doing over the past eight years, it must be getting through because to suddenly be in a cast last year, and like I said, everyone was already an Equity member and there was literally no one who needed persuading that it was perhaps the right thing to do to be a member of the union. Everyone was like immediately saying "yes, we were already happily members". "Yes this working practice is wrong, let's collectively do something about it". And it was, yeah, it was really refreshing. Really, really nice.

Jeff Howarth: How unusual is that then? That everyone in the cast is a member and that the company was an open door, or maybe not? I'm not sure how much you had to fight for that? Maybe you could tell us (that's two questions), how unusual and how much of a fight was it? And congratulations, that sounds brilliant.

Paul Valentine: Thanks [LAUGHS]. So, how unusual is it to find members or, or find that people in the cast that are already members? I would say it's not unusual to find members in a cast. There'll always be a few, but I've never come across it where it's a hundred percent of a cast are already Equity members. I'm just thinking back to other casts that I've been in. A lot of people were, again, like I said, because Equity has its brand almost, which is really, really useful. I'd say I've, of every union in the country Equity probably has the strongest brand because every, virtually everyone has heard of an "Equity card", even if they don't know what a union is. I mean, myself included. I'm a prime example. I'd heard of an Equity card. I didn't know what the trade union movement was, but I knew it was something that actors have. So it's got that advantage. But yeah, I mean usually I'm thinking back to my first tour that I did, straight out of drama school and I think in a cast of, again, that there was a cast of about six to eight, and there were two or three people that weren't members that the regional organizer gave membership forms to and said, "Oh yeah, you should join".

And then I think that that's probably, I would say you're looking at probably in each cast, 60% membership, maybe 40% non-members. A bit of a sweeping statement, but it's probably about that, roughly speaking from my experience. And then if you have a bad experience, you can often persuade people to join. As is often the case. If there's a bad experience.

I mean PCS wise, it's about the same. About the same percentages I would say. I mean what has happened is because of all this Coronavirus stuff, our PCS branch membership has shot up, like we became, we became the fastest growing branch in the entire union. At one point, it was ridiculous. About 40 people joined in the space of about a week because all of a sudden they felt like they needed protection. So that happens as well. But I would say generally speaking, at Southbank, the numbers are still strong. We're still looking at sort of 60% membership I would say, across the entire unionized bit. So I think maybe, yeah, comparison wise you're probably looking at maybe like 60%, which again would always be considered quite strong. But it's, yeah, but it's, but it's like I said with the latest job it's 100%, it's quite amazing, which was just like, wow! Not that you need validation, but it does kind of validate your activism to an extent that you think to yourself...actually all this, all the hours that you put in attending meetings and trying to bang the drum about how important Equity is, you think to yourself, Oh, well actually, yeah, maybe this is, it's actually working. This is a, I haven't been wasting my time for the past eight years. This is, this is, yeah, it's positive. I forgot what your second question was now.

Jeff Howarth: It was asking you how you managed to persuade the theatre company to give you minimum wage, or was it above minimum wage?

Paul Valentine: So persuading the company? It was... it wasn't an easy task. Put it that way. And this happens a lot in theatre, that you get a lot of "Woe-is-me" stories from the producers in theatre that, "Oh, it's hard to pay you! Oh the payments come in here. And it's like, well, actually, yeah, it's not just you who's, who's living the sob story here. We've got rent to pay and all that sort of stuff. Um, so it was, it was tricky, but this particular theatre company I know in the past has had a bit of a history of being a bit spotty in its, in its payments, like it claims to pay them the minimum wage, but does it when you work at the hours you've worked. Also like I said, the worst thing was actually was the fact that the payments were trickling in. So one week you'd get 300 pounds, the next week you'd get 150.

And it's like, well I can't do any planning for that. I don't know what you're going to pay me. This is a massive problem. And I, I think again, this is where it's interesting.

This year it all seemed to come to a head because the company has three separate troupes that, that go out across the country with, with two plays each. And I think this is the first time that they've had such radical kind of feedback. And Equity has got so involved because you had all, all members of our cast, all eight of us or 100% membership emailing, sounding off. One of the other casts as well had problems. And I think they probably had about sort of 80% of their cast were members, so they kicked off as well. And the other cast [THE THIRD] I think might have, might have kicked off too. So it was a kind of coming to a head. I feel like we hit the precipice almost that in the past they've had like one or two people who are active members complain to Equity. But because there hadn't been enough of that collective action, nothing's been done about it. But this time I think, with again, well it's actually, it's an indictment of how collective action works. Like if one or two people on a cast complaint, it can be quite easily sort of shunted. But the fact that every cast complained, and large proportions of every cast complained and because we all complained to the right person at Equity, because I knew who the right person was for us all to complain to. Then of course that had a knock on effect that the Equity staff members were thinking, Oh hang on, this is important because we've got multiple members collectively complaining. So then they would get in contact with the producer of the company. So it was all that cumulative knock on effect. So again, I suppose it does, it is an indictment of how collective organizing can actually have an effect and could work really, really well.

Jeff Howarth: Has this been reported on, in the magazine? The Equity magazine. Is this something that is too recent?

Paul Valentine: I think it's too recent. I mean the one thing that is happening reporting-wise is that, Charlotte messaged me the other day and said that she's going to ... there's the Low Pay Commission they're called, which you've probably heard of. Charlotte is our Low Pay, No Pay officer at Equity. So she naturally has a lot of involvement with the Low Pay Commission. So she's, she's writing some sort of report and she asked me if I minded putting in the story of this theatre company in there, it's all going to remain completely anonymous, she said, but, uh, the actual stories behind what happened is going to be sent to the Low Pay Commission. So that's obviously got a political element to it. So that's exciting. It is so recent because also just before this all kicked off, we had a meeting at Equity, that again, Charlotte's trying to organize because obviously I'm not the only person who's complained about this low pay theatre world.

And it also happens in Theatre in Education as well. We had a meeting and she invited a lot of people that have complained to her about various companies sort of dicking them over as it were. We all came in and we chatted about our experiences and Charlotte was making notes. So this was all an ongoing project anyway. And I think probably the theatre company being on the fringe agreement probably would have been shouted about, had all the Covid stuff, not suddenly kicked off because they probably would have been on it this summer. So that's when they could have used that as a positive. At the moment, I just tend to use it as a positive in conversations with would-be members or members at branches as an example of what Equity can do for them.

cause it's a great, that's a great story that it's like if people, even people who are members sometimes think, Oh well I don't know why I'm here, I'm out of work. I've got the insurance but that's no good cause I'm not in work anyway. All that sort of stuff. But I can say, well actually no, all of a sudden when you are in work, this has got me like 700 quid that I wasn't expecting to have. All that, all that sort of stuff. So all those stories at the moment, it's just

sort of a, it's a good little activist story, but you're right. Certainly when it, when we do get a lot of this coming together, it's something to shout about, but I think it will be shouted about in a more unified approach rather than just, I think actually talking to Charlotte as well, and I think she's right.

What we tend to do and what has happened in the past is little victories like that are shouted about. But actually, that's not the best way to recruit. What you want is all these little victories in one umbrella and then you've got a far stronger recruiting tool, which is what she's trying to create now with our little group meeting before all the Covid stuff kicked off. That really what we want to do is try and get a universal win as much as possible across small scale, touring theatres, across Theatre in Education across small scale, pantomime touring. Because it all ties in together where there's this culture of low pay and not paying properly. And the more victories we get, the more of these companies that get on the fringe agreement, then it's, it's like I said, it's a far stronger recruitment to say, yeah, actually look, because of all these things we've all met together as a group, we all exchange stories, we've got a plan of action and this is what we want. So we're very much.. the good thing is we're on the path, I like to say, because there're already good signs that these meetings are happening that in other people's experiences as well, it's making people, often young members join the union. So we're on this snowball now I think, which is again, really positive.

Jeff Howarth: Brilliant. Has the theatre company been persuaded to the benefits to its reputation or as a PR thing? That it could be useful.

Paul Valentine: Yeah, yeah. Very much so because the fringe agreement itself that we've got at Equity has been around for a few years now. And essentially, the fringe sector in both London and beyond, which are obviously, which is kind of these small theatre companies that employ people on a short-term basis and they'll be performing in smaller venues. It was always a little bit of a Wild West [LAUGHS], for performers. So any company that has now signed up to this fringe agreement is, are able to stick it on their flyer that we are an Equity paying company or an Equity fringe company. And you're right, that's it. It has had an effect on their PR. That Equity will then shout about the fact that they're like, these are the good companies to work for.

So therefore the companies themselves get better quality applicants. If you're looking at purely as a sort of jobs kind of thing that they will find that their applications and the people who apply for their jobs will be a higher calibre of applicant than what they would expect not on an Equity contract. And then as an Equity member, you're then given the peace of mind that, you know, you're in that contract and you know that it's got a sound legal basis and there's less things to worry about. So yeah, you're right. It's all, as a whole. It's the companies that are on the Equity fringe agreement. Any agreement will probably argue that by being on it, it's improving their own business and that is certainly, an argument that, that we would take, that I think Equity wise as well and say, look, all these companies that have got such a good reputation, part of their reputation is the fact that they respect the workforce that they're employing. And then you stick your Equity stamp on your flyers, and then everyone knows about it.

And more also, I don't know this, I'd have to say, I don't know if anyone's done any like research, but I would imagine as well, and certainly I do this when I look at what plays are on, if I've got a choice of two fringe shows, for example, that I might fancy seeing and I could only afford to go to one of them. If I saw on their flyer that one of them was paying their actors the fringe agreement and one wasn't, that would sway my decision as to what to go and see. And I think that, I can't believe I'm the only one who does that and goes and looks at it and goes, Oh, well both plays sound pretty good, but this company seemed like that

they're respecting their actors. So because of that, I'm going to, I'm going to invest my tenner into this company because I'd rather go and see a show that I know my, my 10 pounds is potentially going into one of the pockets of someone that I'm seeing. So you've got, yeah, certainly got that element to it as well, I think.

Jeff Howarth: Can you tell me about your current roles in the higher level of PCS and Equity? You're Young Members Councillor at Equity and Chair of PCS aren't you. What do they involve?

Paul Valentine: So Equity Young Members Councillor has been a real kind of, I mean it's been, Equity has been a story of how I've just kind of worked my way up as it were. And I've learned more about the union. So I started off at South and Southeast London, which is branch level, which is kind of seen as the bread and butter of the union. And then because I was so involved there, some people were involved in the Young Members' Committee, which is like, a national thing. And they said that because I was getting to know more and more active members, they said, no, you should stand for this. You're obviously already involved in the branch level. Why don't you try and join us in that? So I got elected into the Young Members Committee, which advises the union on anything young members related, again, on kind of a national level. And the way Equity structures work. You've got all these various committees at national level. So, you've got Young Members, the Race Equality Committee, Deaf and Disabled Members Committee, LGBTQ+ Committee, you know, all the various kinds of equalities committees working on a national level.

And we also have Equity Council, which is the main elected kind of ruling body of Equity the union. And on Equity Council there are some sort of seats that are general for anyone to be elected onto, but it's also got protected seats as well. So that again, the demographic of the the decision making body of the union doesn't end up all being the same demographic. You have to have that diversity obviously. So one of those seats is the Young Members Councillor, which ties in or heavily links in with the Young Members Committee and they, that can be that nice conduit, that communication conduit between the Committee and between Equity the Council as a whole. Which again kind of informs the general movement of the union and informing staff of where the union sort of needs to go.

And yeah, it just so happened a couple of years ago that, ... the elections happen every two years... and the Young Members Councillor's seat was up for election again. So I thought I'd go for that because I'd been on the members committee by then for about four or five years. So I already had a good idea of the internal workings of the union and I'd kind of, it's weird actually, I'd sort of seen it as a training ground almost. Every bit of the union you're learning or you were involved in, you learn something new about. So I'd almost had a very nice step up from branch level to committee national level onto the main body of the Council. And I've seen that it's actually really helped me in comparison to some of the councillors who have got perhaps elected onto the general seats because again, that could be any Equity member can be elected onto a general council seat. They haven't necessarily been involved in their branches much or national committees or things like that. So they come into Council and they're a bit sort of rabbit in the headlights. But I feel like I've almost had a training. Um, and again, Charlotte's been brilliant because she's, she's been with us every step of the way along that sort of young members track.

So when I came onto Council, I knew how to kind of change things in the union. I understood what a motion was and I understood all this various jargon that is quite inaccessible a lot of the time. But because I'd been involved at every little step up, I'd gradually sort of sucked it in and understood how everything works. So it was just a natural progression really to become Young Members Councillor. And because of that, like in the

last two years, I've managed to do a lot of like steering of the union in directions that I think or I would hope the young members would be interested in or certainly that certainly everyone I've spoken to is interested. For example I got Equity to undertake a green review because obviously that's another big thing amongst young people at the moment is the climate emergency and all that, that sort of stuff.

Quite a big heavy topic of conversation. So I thought, well, actually, yeah, what we should do then as Equity is we should be caring about our "greenness" as well. So I put in this motion that said we need to conduct a green review. We need to look at all that, all aspects of the union, how it functions in relation to carbon footprint through to, to everything basically that was green related. And it's been really successful because it's changed, for example, we get our Equity magazine, it used to come in a plastic wrap and now, now it comes in a biodegradable wrap and all various sort of Equity resources have now become all sort of biodegradable or green friendly, all that sort of stuff. So you kind of, the way you sort of build yourself up in the union as you learn more on one side of the coin sort of thing, you learn, about how the structures of Equity work and then the more committees you're involved in, you get to meet more members and make more friends and then the two pair up because all of a sudden you've got this knowledge of what yourself and other members want and you've suddenly got this knowledge of how to make it happen.

So that's kind of what's been the exciting thing there that you're suddenly at this point where you've reached the peak together and it's like, yeah, I've got both now I've got that skillset now.... I've got the skillset to know what members want and I've got the skillset to make it happen. So that's, that's what's been, I guess really exciting about getting involved to that point. And now it's an interesting one because like I said, I'm aging out now in Equity, so I sort of, I was elected at 30 so you can be elected when you're still in that young members demographic. But the elections are coming up now next month. So obviously I'm not allowed to stand for young members now because that's two years on. I'm 32, if anything, it's funny actually this interview is almost like closure [LAUGHS] because it's sort of, it's, I'm looking back on it now cause I'm just thinking ... So I'm still going to be incredibly supportive of the young members and the committee and we've still got a lot of parallels, I've aged out now of those democratic structures. So I'm going to stand for, for Equity Council and we'll see what happens.

Obviously it's all democratically elected, but it is nice to feel like all the young members stuff has given me that foundation and that feels so important and really nice that it's all through young members engagement that you suddenly realize and it's like through conversations like this, when you look back on it you think, Oh yeah, actually a lot has been done, which is really nice to think because obviously as, as you know, like with anything, when you're doing it sort of day by day, you hit brick walls or you just sometimes you just feel like nothing is happening at all, but when you do look back on it, you're like, yeah, that worked really well. And then I guess it's like I said, it's funny with PCS, the whole thing almost ran in parallel with Equity that I did while I was becoming branch secretary and then as the Young Members Committee person in Equity.

PCS stuff ran kind of concurrently with Equity in a lot of ways. I started off in Equity at the branch to start off with, got onto the young members committee. Then probably about that time I became rep at PCS and then I, it's really hard to sort of quantify how it kind of spiralled. I think a lot of these things sometimes once you, I think this happens in a lot of sort of voluntary organizations that things spiral almost out of control sometimes that you volunteer for one small thing and then you look back on it and all of a sudden you've got

your finger in every single pie. So I guess it was in parallel that as I was learning through Equity, I was trying to sort of bring the best of Equity into PCS and vice versa.

And I just ended up being elected as the chair of the branch at Southbank as well. Because I mean actually Southbank had a few similarities with Equity in the sense that the people who ran the branch, the PCS branch at Southbank, they'd been doing it for so long that I think, I mean actually speaking to them later on, they were getting a bit bored of it really, that they'd been chair and secretary for so many years. We're talking like sort of 20, 25 years. And that again, they were in a similar demographic to the South and Southeast London branch when I first joined, that they were very, very good, very experienced union activists and they'd be fantastic to, to sort of, I don't know, defend your rights at work, all that sort of stuff. But they didn't have a first clue about recruiting young members because they weren't young anymore.

So all that sort of stuff had passed them by. So I made a challenge. That was it. Now that was, yeah, sometimes I can be a bit audacious and I was like, right. You guys have been doing this for far too long. I'll be chair of the branch for a bit because we need to bring this into the 21st century. And what actually happened when I did, and I sort of made that, that challenge is the chair of the branch was like, "Oh, thank goodness I'm not, this isn't a challenge. Have it." You be chair. I want you to be like, we want some, we want some fresh blood". So it did him a favour. And at that time I mentioned briefly earlier, the guy who was the branch organizer at the time is now the secretary.

He took over the secretarial position from the other guy who'd been doing it for about 20, 25 years. So actually breathed a bit of life into that branch and he's probably why our membership has grown too because all of a sudden there was a visible presence of myself and Gareth because the way we work, the other two, the original chair and vice chair, they weren't actually on Southbank that often. They were kind of around a little bit, but they, the nature of their job was often on the Hayward Gallery Touring, so they'd be in the vans sort of moving the stuff to and from the Haywood. Whereas myself and Gareth, our positions meant that we were, we were bodies on the ground so the union suddenly became a lot more visible and it felt a lot fresher because we were the new chair and new secretary.

I mean, I've always, I've always kind of joked that one of the big things you want to do as a union activist is work to make yourself redundant. Like that's, that should be that. That has always been my goal in a lot of respects. Like I've sort of, I did the secretary stuff at South or Southeast London. We did a lot of successful stuff there. So therefore that was the work never completed. But it was time to give some, a fresh pair of eyes onto that. So then I got into the Young Members Committee and then we did a lot of work, around for example, the Back for the Future campaign and the English baccalaureate was going to knock out any art subjects, things like that. That was one of our big campaigns at the time. Lots of things around that.

Lots of things about young members involvement in the union. Great. I was involved in that, but again, there needs to be fresh eyes onto that. And certainly after four or five years of doing that, it was time for fresh people coming in. And now I'm on the council and it sort of certainly in young member circles actually that obviously young members can be 30 and under. But there is a massive difference now between when I liaise with the Equity young members committee now a lot of them are early twenties and I'm now early thirties and that 10 years is a massive difference. So it's really important to like to step aside and let people, people learn the ropes themselves cause these activists are now going through the journey that I went through and it will be invaluable to them in 10 year's time.

I mean obviously for me like in 10 year's time when I'm early forties there'll be stuff probably that I've never even considered now that will suddenly become relevant.

It's the worst thing you can do, I think, is to sit on a position, because you've got to bring that experience, definitely. But too many people in the union movement sit on a position and don't do anything with it. And that has always been my biggest bugbear. I always think that's the biggest reason why members and young members don't engage with the unions because they don't see any fresh change and they don't see that opportunity for fresh change. Cause you see the same people doing the same things or you just get in that mindset. And I've been there before. You get in the mindset, you think, "Oh, well what's the point? It's already been done. They're the people who do it". And there's no union is going to move on with that kind of mindset. I think.

Jeff Howarth: Have you attended the annual conferences at PCS and Equity, I presume they hold them?

Paul Valentine: Yeah. I haven't been to the PCS ones actually. But I've been to the Equity ones on multiple occasions. Funnily enough, I'm now on the, we've got an Equity working party about how we're going to change our annual conferences. Because again, they're a bit, so a lot of the time they turn into a bit of a talking shop. And we identified this as a Young Members Committee about five or six years ago. And as you know, unions can move at the speed of an oil tanker sometimes. So we identified this issue about five or six years ago and said, hang on a minute, this is a bit of a talking shop. This isn't necessarily encouraging more activists into the union. And now we're finally at a stage where I'm part of a committee that's looking at how we're going to reform and change our annual conference. So that's, yeah, so I've been to that.

I went to the TUC one actually a couple of years ago that 150 year one that up in Manchester. I was there as well, it probably ties in with those interviews they were doing. I don't think they interviewed me actually then. But there was a concerted effort to get more young members to go to that one in Manchester. Cause I remember yeah there was, which is why I went long because Equity decided that out of their delegation of four, they'd have the president and the vice president and then they said, well let's have the Young Members Councillor and then we'll have one other elective representative. And cause I was obviously Young Members Councillor a couple of years ago as well. I ended up going along to that

Jeff Howarth: Yeah, I went to it as well. We ran a stall [TUC LIBRARY AND PEOPLE'S HISTORY MUSEUM]. It was a good one.

Paul Valentine: Oh right, cool. Yeah, I got to speak in it as well. It's just like, I mean again, actually it was funny. It was, it didn't exactly phase me. I mean, because.... again, it's all about building up activists. I think because I've been to so many TUC Young Members conferences that really the TUC, whereas again, some activists come to the TUC and it's like, Whoa, this is this TUC conference... I'd done so many young members TUCs that it was just ... it was the same thing. We've just a few more flashy graphics on the screen [LAUGHS]. Like there was no... it didn't really bother me. And then of course everyone always jokes that Equity are the kind of the best speakers anywhere cause it's our job [LAUGHS]. So it's quite funny afterwards, there were all these, all these other activists coming up to me and some of the others saying, "Oh you spoke very, very well! Oh, well done." Which we were obviously very grateful. But we did find it quite funny because in the back of my mind we were thinking, yeah, that's good to know, cause that is our job to be as clear and concise as possible. But it was quite good fun.

Changing Equity annual conference. Essentially, we just I think it was me and a few other activists felt, and especially as young members, that the things that were being talked about, sometimes the conversations would go round in circles. Every branch and every committee in the union is allowed to bring motions to the conference to get things changed. And sometimes a lot of these motions are very samey or sometimes they come along and they don't feel like they've got any particular relevance. Sometimes these various branches might submit something that it's just for them to get up on the podium and say something. And the timeframe for these annual conferences is usually only like a weekend anyway. So there's a lot of wasted time. So me and some of the other members at the time felt like it would actually be better suited timewise to have a conference where there are fringes. Like you'd get at the TUC. You don't really get that at an Equity annual conference. And it's partly because our union is not a massive union in any way. But we started to think, well actually it'd be good to engage our members, try and get some training in there, try and get some activists meetups. All the sort of stuff that I kind of talked about at the beginning of the interview. About how moving away from this kind of, what I personally think is a quite antiquated view of a union meeting. Must have an agenda, must have a chair, must have this, must have that. That doesn't allow for any kind of innovation at all. And the, the Equity annual conference, actually... it's been going in its current form for probably about 20 years now and some of the people on the working group were involved in its last reform and hearing what they did is really, really good cause it used to be just an annual general meeting that really didn't have any sort of guest speakers or anything at all, which it does have now.

So a lot of, what you hear is really positive. What they reformed 20 years ago was good. Like, if it was still what it was previous to 20 years ago, it really would be antiquated. But. Having said that, again tying in what I said about sitting on your hands and not making any sort of innovation at all.... 20 odd years is quite a long time, and some more changes need to be made again, to make sure that it's relevant for the next generation of activists coming through. And those of us on that young members committee, five years ago identified then that it was not serving the purpose for us as young members. We felt like it was wasting our time and then that time we could have actually spent more time with other activists learning how the union works and learning how to be better activists.

So it all kind of ties in with it. So it's all about usage of time because you've still only got that weekend, but we need to make sure that when people are up on that podium, the stuff that is being said is relevant and is relevant to all members, including young members as well. And we just didn't feel that that was the case over the last few annual conferences. So yeah, it all kinds of ties in with that. That's where we're at at the moment. And that's kind of been an ongoing project as well. Like I said, cause we identified it about five years ago and we've now got this working party together, so can kind of feed in all that, all that kind of all those thoughts that we had over the past sort of five years. And hopefully again, it will reform it and make it more relevant to young members and members alike.

Jeff Howarth: Again, is that something that's been publicised?

Paul Valentine: I think it's not, I mean it's certainly no big secret. The thing is that because it's, again, it's relatively new. I mean we've only met like two times I think, and we've done, actually, no, we did a general member survey for everyone to find out as much as we could about people's general views of the annual conference. So yeah, no, it is public knowledge that it's happening because we've done our survey. I can't remember whether we've had all the results back from that yet. We might not have done. Or maybe they're being discussed at the next meeting, something like that. But it's all very much in the works. And once we come

up with a set of proposals, I think, then Council will have to vote on them to ratify it. But then it would, I guess be trialled and tested at the, I mean, I can't remember what timeframe we're looking at. It would probably be the, the annual conference in two or three years time or something like that.

Jeff Howarth: Are you tempted to do the same thing for PCS? Or is it just too much? You must have limits to your capacity.

Paul Valentine: yeah, pretty much. I think that's pretty much why I haven't gone into a PCS one. Cause the PCS one often clashes with the Equity one. So I've, I've always, kind of, prioritized the Equity one. Yeah. So...

Yeah, I do ask him sometimes. I'm trying to remember now what he thinks of the thing, what he thinks of the, the PCS ones. I'll have to ask him. Yeah, I can't remember now, off-hand. He's not really, he's not said that. He's never complained about it though, which is always a good thing. He's never.. whereas as young members say. I've never had Gareth come back from the PCS one and say, Oh that was dire. So maybe that's a, positive thing. I'll have to ask him cause it'd be interesting to see how they compare. I mean certainly as well PCS cause it's a bigger union, its annual conference will function probably a little bit more like the TUC annual conference. Whereas Equity being a union of only 40,000 is slightly different. However, actually that's the argument I've been making in Equity that despite the fact that we're smaller, it doesn't mean that we can't have the same things. You just scale everything down slightly. And one thing we were discussing, this could be one major change actually, that Equity has always traditionally had its annual conference in a hotel with conferencing facilities, which is incredibly limiting. Actually what you want is a conference centre and then you will have fringe rooms and all that sort of stuff. And it's all very antiquated from how Equity was. And so it all comes from a nice place actually. It was all about how, what Equity wanted to do was to look after the members that were coming to travel to the conference.

So you wanted to give them a hotel room onsite. They just could sort of roll out of bed into the annual conference and all that sort of accessibility side of things. But nowadays there's so many conference venues, specific conference venues that have deals with hotels anyway. It's the norm to work like that. You don't have to have a hotel that has a conference hall, you can have a conference centre that will always have a hotel near it. So it's little things like that, where Equity is ever so slightly stuck in the past, and it comes from a good place. But again, sometimes you need to do a little bit of reform. So that's certainly something that I think we can, we can nudge towards changing. Which again will allow us to have more sort of more modern, I guess actually conference style where you can have the conference and then will have the space and capacity to have fringe meetings and all that sort of stuff, which I think probably PCS already has because I, I know they tend to meet down in Brighton, which of course has got the conference centre that a lot of unions meet down in.

So that's, yeah, that's where we're at with it. I think this is probably one of the occasions actually where I often try and take the best from Equity and put it in PCS and vice versa. And there's probably an argument here that getting the best of PCS and putting it in Equity might work. So, yeah. Well we'll see how it goes, but fingers crossed it will be all right. [LAUGHS]

Jeff Howarth: Were there any other issues you think young people face, that from your experience that you think PCS or Equity have helped with?

Paul Valentine: So I would say actually, low pay, the environment... those and mental health I would say are probably the big, the big three that run through both unions and indeed my involvement with the green party as well and my friends who work in the Labour

party. Like I'd say those, those three pillars ... I would say for our generation of activists...so anyone who's about where, so I'm 32 now, so for anyone who's 32 and under. People want to talk about it. They want to talk about the climate emergency, they want to talk about people's mental health and mental wellbeing at work and they want to talk about pay; specifically low pay or no pay. I've, I've tended to find that across all spectrums, political and union didn't matter which one it was. Those three things just keep coming up and keep coming up. So it's been, again, it's been nice to cross it over, which is good because it's sort of, you get perspectives from all those, I mean I listed what? Four separate institutions almost.... Equity, PCS, Green Party, Labour Party, all those perspectives come in and at the end of the day you're pretty much singing from the same hymn sheet, which is good as well. So it's been a nice, it's been a nice exercise in collaboration as well. So to prove that it can actually be done because there's obviously a lot of often people will perceive that the left is splitting off into various factions and all that sort of stuff. But actually for me, when it comes to mental health, climate emergency and low paid jobs, give or take all of those, all of those unions, all those political parties pretty much align. So you can all work together and then you start to get stuff done. Like the Green Review, like Equity Contracts, like PCS having um, the, the London Living Wage at Southbank, like the political parties fighting for that Living Wage, all that sort of stuff. So yeah. Yeah. Sometimes, like I said, sometimes it can feel like an uphill struggle, but when you do sort of frame it and think about it in those terms, there are a lot of positives to be had from it as well, which is good.

Jeff Howarth: Are there any campaigns that the young workers committees have been involved in or that your branch has been involved in to do with mental health of young people.

58:33

Paul Valentine: There was, I know I went to the TUC Young Workers Conference, I'm sure one of the mental health motions ultimately went to the main TUC one year. Because the TUC Young Workers conference, every union submits, does their motion. And I mean the TUC Young Workers can be a bit of a talking shop actually, I always joke because it's, everyone sort of comes up with these motions from their unions and no one's going to disagree with them cause there's just nothing controversial. And someone will come up and say, Oh, austerity is bad. Okay, let's vote on it. Who thinks austerity is bad? Yes? What I've always wanted to put my hand up and say, "No! No! Austerity is good". Just, just to cause a debate. You know, just for the fun of it. But you have all these, all these motions. But then the whole conference then votes on the two priorities and then I think those two motion priorities then get fed into the main TUC. And I'm sure mental health is one of them in the last year or two. I'm sure it was because again, it was just what everyone was and still is, is talking about. So there was, there was definitely cross union work on that of which Equity has been a part of this. There's something called Arts and Minds as well, That Equity does, and works with, I think they work with BAPAM which is the, um, it's a British, I forget the exact acronym, but it's, um, essentially it's a kind of medical profession for the arts. And they were helping out with this Arts and Minds Equity launch of a whole document about Arts and Minds. Equities now got a mental health line as well, which I think we became the first union to have one of those. And certainly, again, the young members would have fed into that. And we've fed into it over the years. So there's, yeah, there's lots of, there hasn't, there hasn't been one overriding campaign, but lots of, lots of feeding in.

Again, it's that sort of, it's that principle of you, you do all these little things and at the time they feel pretty insignificant. But when you look back on it, you think, Oh, hang on, all of a sudden, we've got a dedicated mental health line that not all other unions have. So then

what you do is you say to, I don't know, for example, I then say to PCS and say, Oh look, look, we've done this at Equity... your turn. Then it will eventually everyone kind of levels up. Oh! That's a Conservative phrase. Didn't mean to use that..." levelling up". [LAUGHS] Oops! You know what I mean. You want the race to the top rather than race to the bottom sort of thing. So I think it all does tie in.

Jeff Howarth: Just don't mention shaking up cereal boxes, isn't that a famous Boris Johnson quote, about certain cornflakes rising to the top, sort of modern metaphor.

Paul Valentine: [LAUGHS] Well, I remember a couple of years ago, solidarity used to be very much the phrase of the trade union movement. And now I hear conservative MPS use it all the time. They always talk about "solidarity". And I think "that's not your phrase! You can't have that!" [LAUGHS]

Jeff Howarth: Can you tell me how Covid-19 is now effecting you and the people you work with?

Paul Valentine: Sure. So yeah, the, the Covid-19 stuff. So me personally, and I kind of, I'm similar to a lot of people I think actually in my position. In that, and this spans both quite nicely actually, with both Equity and PCS in the sense that as an actor there is now virtually no work available at all. Obviously because all venues, film sets, everything's, everything's been closed down. There is some voice over work available, which is why I've got this microphone because I thought, well, yeah, we're gonna try and capitalize on this and try and diversify with the equipment I've got. And there's the odd commercial that keeps coming through where they, they're going to get you to film bits in your own home. But certainly you've suddenly got that, that drop off of potential work. And then often as actors, obviously you have to have a day job to pay your rent.

Naturally these day jobs have to be flexible work, often zero hour contracts or casual work in that sort of respect. So at Southbank, I'm obviously working in front of house. Southbank Centre is an arts venue, so it's closed, so there's no front of house work. I often work as a tour guide as well with the London transport museum. That's all gone because obviously being a museum that's closed and we can't do tours, I do tours with the Imperial War Museum as well at the Churchill War Rooms. Obviously again, cultural sector, that's all been ripped out. So all of that has been been quashed. So right at the beginning I was, I was in quick and I got myself down to the local Tesco and I got a job, night work doing shelf stacking in Tesco Friday to Monday.

So that's actually been a real lifeline cause that pays the rent in effect. So I've been very, very lucky in that respect. And this was before the furloughing scheme came in as well. So it was all very much everyone just panicked because everyone thought, well that's it. There's no money coming. "Oh shit! what do we do?" So that was very much from that place. Now then of course the furloughing scheme came in as well and that was quite relevant at Southbank because being chair of the union, my job is to negotiate pay and conditions with management. So again, myself as chair Gareth as secretary and also a couple of others because we've actually got two unions at Southbank Unite and PCS. Unite tend to represent the more office based staff and we represent the more front of house production based staff.

We immediately had to be finger on the pulse, to negotiate with Southbank how best to protect the workers that are working there. And we've, again, we've had some success actually, which I don't think a lot of other cultural institutions have done. But what we said was once, the furlough scheme was announced and we knew we Southbank could take them up on it, obviously it's 80% of people's wages and we said right, well 80% isn't good enough for people on the lowest wage there, which is the London Living Wage. We said

even 80% that's going to be a real struggle to live on. So we negotiated with Southbank that anyone on the London Living Wage, up to the equivalent of annual salary of 25 grand, they would get paid 95% and then anyone from 25 grand to 30 grand, would get paid 90% of their wages and everyone 30 grand above will be on the 80% so Southbank would essentially top up the lower paid.

And we managed to agree that, actually in April everyone got a hundred percent because that was already sort of part of that timeframe cause it will happened in March. For May's pay that sliding scale has come in. And then we've got to still negotiate June. But again, we want to try and keep that sliding scale in place. So that's been a positive bit of union involvement that we've had in relation to this Coronavirus stuff.

Equity wise it's a little bit more complicated I would say because obviously it's all the self-employed. But Equity really did bang the drum for self employed people because when that furlough scheme came out originally it said nothing about self-employed people and essentially dropped them off the radar. And Equity actually (did) not exactly came to blows with the TUC, but Equity criticized the TUC. Because the TUC, after the furlough scheme came out, said "look what we've done. This is brilliant, isn't it? Everyone's happy, all our workers are all happy. They're going to get money." And Equity went, no, no, you've, you've messed this up completely. Look, it's all very well if you're on a salary but the self-employed, they're, they're messed up. [GENTLE LAUGH] So Equity really did fight hard, the staff members for, for polarity. So now we've got the furlough scheme for the self employed. However, again, it's still not good enough because it only counts if you've been self employed for over a year. So all the recent graduates that have come out of drama school in the summer and have gone straight on to shows, including Westend shows, these are people performing at the top of their sort of class, if you like.

They're sort of, they're really kind of talented people. They're obviously going to be having a career in the arts. They're not allowed to apply for anything. So they've lost all their... everything basically. So again, Equity is fighting for that. As a Council, what we did is we boosted our benevolent fund. Which I've used before, actually in other times about three years ago, I was completely, I just ran out of money completely and it really, really helped. And it gives members usually up to about 500 pounds and you just write in, you say why you need it. And we knew that with all this crisis going on, it was going to be needed to be boosted. So we boosted that to the sum of a million pounds, which is a lot for the benevolent fund. We took some out of the general fund, we took some out of various places and then we also launched a campaign for people to donate to it.

One other big advantage Equity has as a union is our high profile members. Being that the nature of the job, we have a lot of high profile members. So we had videos by Mark Rylance, by David Tennant, famous actors saying, look, please donate to this benevolent fund. "We're alright, we're going to donate to it cause we're rich actors already, but we're in the very minority." A lot of a lot of members, actors, stage management, dancers... it doesn't matter, they're going to be struggling. So there, those have been the kind of big main points to me. Really the staff at Equity have been absolutely amazing. They've been almost, I always joke with them because they work so hard. I say to them that they're actually almost going against what the union movement has fought for.

They're going to run themselves into the ground. And I say you've got to look after yourself as well. All this talk we have about mental health and the whole point of the union is to make sure no one gets ill at work and has good conditions. But our staff members are great. They really care. So that in conjunction with us being on Council and making all these changes, there's obviously been the nitty gritty changes. Like we've had a council meeting on zoom as

well. All the, all the sort of online stuff. In fact that is the one positive I think we can ultimately take from this is I've been banging the drum for more digital engagement in our union for ages and this is actually proving that it can be done. There's been a lot of kickback about online meetings and all that sort of stuff over the years saying, "Oh, it's hard to work out who is actually a member and who isn't". And security issues and all that sort of stuff. But we've been forced into doing it because of Covid. I'm hopeful that it might actually spark a bit of a digital revolution in that respect. Cause that's needed. That'll be the next thing. Like so many people, especially in Equity circles, it needs to work like that because the nature of our work, because we were all over the place, we don't have a fixed workplace. So all this digital stuff that is, that is the one positive I would say. Otherwise it's still going to be, it's going to be massively damaging for the industry. I mean today for example, the Nuffield theatre in Southampton has gone into administration. But equally, I do know that our staff members have constantly got the ear of ministers in Parliament. They're constantly looking after our members.

It's not all doom and gloom. But it's going to be a very testing time for the industry. The only positives that I can take from it are maybe that digital engagement. And it might actually ultimately perhaps give us a different.... as we come out of it, as we come out of the of coronavirus and start to invite people back into theatres and stuff like that, it might change the landscape enough that people will understand the value of the art that's being performed and it might actually allow better negotiating positions in the future and better "best-practice" in companies because people will start to value, realize the value. Like for example, so many people now are watching all these shows on TV, like National Theatre Live and all that sort of stuff. Everything is being streamed in and people are suddenly, I think realizing how important arts are and how it shouldn't be underfunded and it might sort of clear out some of the deadwood as well.

The theatre companies and other companies that have been sort of coasting along on this premise that, "Oh, it's all a bit of a laugh". "We'll just pay the actors as much as we can". "There's no sort of set fee to it". I'm, I'm sort of hopeful in a way that actually that practice will end now, that it will be a case of, well actually Covid does actually just knock them out of the equation because they didn't have any sort of solid foundation to start with. So it's a bit of, it's sort of the only way to kind of look at it on a positive. It's going to certainly change the landscape anyway. And there's like... but I mean the Nuffield is not one of those companies. The Nuffield in Southampton is known for being like a fantastic regional theatre. So the fact that that's gone into administration is already a warning sign. So we'll have to monitor that carefully. But like I said, I know that the staff members and those of us on council will keep sort of fighting the good fight as much as we can, but it's, it's going to be longterm, obviously, because out of every sector. We're going to be the last to go back. That would just be the nature of it, I think.

Jeff Howarth: That's brilliant. I think that covers it really. Is there anything else you think we missed out on or is there anything else you'd like to say?

Paul Valentine: I guess the only other thing I'd touch on is how, because of all my involvement in the unions, that's what got me political as well, which is interesting, which is something I would have never predicted previously. Cause I'm now on the executive of the Green Party as the trade union liaison officer. So I got elected onto there as well. And if it wasn't for Equity and ultimately PCS... Whenever it was, it must have been, I think it was the 2015 election that was like the first general election where I actually started to look at the parties and what they stood for rather like 2010 where it was just sort of you just sort of

follow the sheep as it were. So I think that's something that would be interesting for young activists in the future to think about.

Like I said, in a way I'm from a, a weird side of the coin cause a lot of activists I meet have already got very sort of "right-on" Labour-type parents or whatever. But there must be a whole swathe of activists out there that would come at it like me, with no real experience of any sort of union or any sort of politics and the whole thing spiralled. And ultimately, like I said, it's led me to being on the executive of a national political party. And really I owe all that to Equity because otherwise this like little spiral of events would have never happened. So I just find, when I look back on it, I just find that all really fascinating how ultimately everything ties together, but I certainly don't regret it at all. I'm glad that it's given me that opportunity to learn so much about workers and workplaces and ultimately how it all ties in with politics as well.

Jeff Howarth: How do you anticipate your future? It sounds like you could go in so many different paths in the future. It could be a political path, a trade union path, an artistic path. Maybe it's unfair to get you to speculate.

Paul Valentine: It's hard to say. I mean, at the moment, my union stuff and my green party stuff. because I've still got a lot in the acting world that I, I feel like I've got unfinished business in the acting world, if that makes sense. That I just like, I've quite, I'm quite single-minded in that respect. You sort of have to be to an extent. The career I want is in the arts. I enjoy acting, I enjoy performing on the stage, that is what I want to do. And I've still got a lot of goals in that as well that I want to achieve. And the venues that I want to perform at and things like that. So there's too much on the list there at the moment that I want to be part of, but equally never say never to like.... I know actor friends who are local councillors or have been local councillors. In fact, one of the guys on the current young members committee is a Labour councillor down in Hastings, I think. I know one of my, my local councillors, who's one of our Green councillors, Scott, he isn't an actor at the moment and I've actually seen how in Lamberth the Labour Party attack him when he misses meetings because he needs to perform to earn money. And obviously performances take place in the evening and council meetings take place in the evening. So I find, I find that whole line of argument fascinating because there's a lot of councillors that work traditional nine to fives and they don't understand our flexible lifestyle and then they attack him for not turning up to council meetings when actually it's not his fault because you can't just live on a, a councillor wage cause it's only like 10 grand or whatever. It's like a sort of stipend. So I find all that, all that sort of thing still fascinates me. But equally, I mean Scott for example, is probably 20 years older than me. So it's one of those where you never say never. Like it's not beyond the realms of possibility, that maybe one day I'd want to stand as a Green councillor, but at the moment I'm very much sort of like I want to focus on my acting because I know there's a lot of a lot of things that I still want to achieve in that respect, but I don't think I'd ever completely give up my political side of things now, just because it's become so embedded into me as a person and what I, what I stand for, and it's sort of, it comes up a lot in auditions as well or it might tie in sometimes with my acting stuff, which is interesting that because obviously there's a lot of Arts Council funded theatre companies that do shows around climate emergency or do stuff that's like political. There's a company called Red Ladder up in Leeds that are a very sort of political company that have been going since like the sixties or seventies for example. So it's all, it's interesting to explore how your work in unions and political parties tie in when you work in the arts. But yeah, we'll see. We'll see.

Jeff Howarth: Sorry just to clarify, I think the connection broke up. Your links are with the Green Party?

Paul Valentine: Yeah, yeah. Green Party. Yes. I'm, yeah, on the National Executive of the Green Party and it's Green Party Trade Union Liaison Officer

Jeff Howarth: Okay, cool. Well thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW