

UNA LASER AGM 10<sup>th</sup> December 2022  
Chair's Report

## 1. Zoom, In-Person and Hybrid

This year we have gradually emerged from a world dominated by COVID. We have continued to have many online events and meetings, but we have also managed several in-person – as well as hybrid – events. In fact, we are learning to have the best of both worlds, being able to reduce our travelling when it would be difficult to bring people together in-person, but enjoying coming together when we can.

## 2. Campaigning

Campaigning is a central part of our activity. We have addressed many important international issues, while continuing to tackle the two major international challenges that have stood out during the year: the war in Ukraine and Climate Change.

We were delighted to welcome, in February, Valeria Minisini, as our Campaigns Officer. She has put detailed background and suggested actions for many of the campaigns on our website.

- Following our AGM in November, we had an excellent summary of COP 26, with thoughts on the next steps, from **Peter Chalkley**, Director of the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit. He reminded us that the UK continued to hold the presidency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change COPs' process right up to COP 27 in Egypt, so we continued to put pressure on the UK government to keep up the momentum in working towards Net Zero and in financing Loss and Damage (social, cultural and economic) for the countries most affected by – but least contributing to – the carbonisation of our atmosphere.
- We worked throughout the year in partnership with other members of the Climate Coalition on various climate campaigns – such as: individual letter-writing; a joint letter to the Prime Minister; and the Great Big Green Week (which, in 2023, will be on 10th – 18th June – to give you time to prepare your branch events!).
- In February, led by former BBC correspondent **Keith Hindell**, we wrote to the Foreign Secretary, urging as much as possible use of the UN Security Council in addressing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This was the first of several campaigns during the year linked to the horrific events in Ukraine: these included support for the work of the UN Human Rights Council's resolution to set up a commission of enquiry; and support for the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia's action and demanding their withdrawal.
- In March, considering the terrible suffering in Yemen, we called for the full restoration of UK aid to that country, and for the cessation of the sale to Saudi Arabia of UK arms, many of which are being used in Yemen.
- In June, in light of the new *The Nationality and Borders Act*, we campaigned to help protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

- In August we analysed priorities for the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. We also shared responses to the BBC's programme, *The Whistle Blowers: Inside the UN*.
- In November, we urged support to address the famine afflicting the people of Somalia

### 3. Regional Councils

Our **Spring Council** was our **Policy Conference**. This was our first hybrid event, held online as well as here in Bermondsey Village Hall. Thanks to many branches and the Policy Committee, led by Peter Walker, we agreed 30 resolutions. This will be reported on separately.

Our **Summer Council** in July was run by UNA Harpenden, again as a hybrid event. Those of us who went in-person were made very welcome by Suheil Shahryar and his team; we enjoyed the informal discussions that zoom excludes. The theme was *Climate Change: Impacts, Reports, Solutions*. Excellent speakers included: Unnikrishnan Nair from the Commonwealth Secretariat; Samiya Selim from the University of Liberal Arts in Bangladesh; John McLavery from Oxfam; James Clarke from Rothamstead Research; Paul Ekins of University College, London; and Dieter Helm from Oxford University.

### 4. UN75 Building a More Secure World

We continue to build on our UN75 *Building a More Secure World* Festival, trying to link our activities into the Actions that were agreed at that event. Our partner in the festival, Peacechild International, is extending the **Whatnext4UN** website to cover further activities looking at ways forward for the UN. The Festival part of the website is unaltered; we encourage branches to build on the workshops and agreed Actions from the festival.

### 5. UNA-UK

This has been a disrupted year for UNA-UK. Their Chief Executive, Natalie Samarasinghe, left soon after completing her sabbaticals in New York. Her successor, Marisa Conway, has recently returned from maternity leave. Several aspects of their work – especially some of those supporting members and branches – have slipped. Recently, there has been confusion about membership and the election of trustees, which is not yet resolved. We are working with Marisa and the new Chair, Baroness Joyce Anelay, to help ensure appropriate support for branches and members. Please let me know your experiences and suggestions.

### 6. Contributions

LASER is very much a team effort and I should like to thank the many who are contributing to our Region's activities. However, first I want us to remember several wonderful friends of LASER who have died this year, but much of whose ideas and work live on: **Peter Greaves** (important worker with UNICEF and writer of many major articles); **Eirwen Harbottle** (tireless worker for peace and security); **Margaret Rayner** and **Derek Smith** (important local workers mostly with Richmond UNA); **Frank Judd** (NGO leader and peer who focussed particularly on the world's poorest people); **Bruce Kent** (peace campaigner); **Rod Fielding** (who held many voluntary roles with UNA-UK); **William Say** (journalist, UN and UNA activist).

We appreciate their many contributions to making the world a better place; we shall miss them.

Now to acknowledge those still being active

- Thank you to the **Executive Committee** for all their support. I would particularly like to thank those who are standing down after many years of substantial contributions: **Neville Grant** (former LASER Chair, current Chair of Blackheath, instigator of today's Ukraine resolution); **Rodney Mantle, René Smit, Rob Storey**, all continuing to be active in South London branches. All the Executive Committee have been very supportive in their ideas and actions this year. A few deserve special recognition:
  - **Peter Webster**, our indefatigable Treasurer and Chair of the Policy Committee, has not only managed the money effectively (and, for the first time for many years, got all our accounts up to date and fully examined) but has also led a successful Policy Conference and helped many meet the technical challenges thrown up by our new zoom-centred activities as well as hosting many successful events for his local Streatham branch (all while still holding down a demanding fulltime job),.
  - For the first half of the year, we were grateful to Peter and **Sarah Webster** for mailing out our Newsletter; we are grateful to **Suheil Shahryar** for taking on this role, as well as leading Harpenden UNA. I am grateful, too, to **Salem Mezhoud** for helping me edit the Newsletter, jazzing it up and giving it the name *Pulse*.
  - **Jane Beeley** has found time – as well as chairing the Tunbridge Wells and Wealden Branch, and nursing her husband Brian through various medical challenges with which we all wish him well – to continue as our Regional Secretary.
  - **Gonzalo Alvarez** has become our Climate and Oceans Officer, building on the remarkable work he has been doing, often involving young people, mostly based around East and West Sussex, but also including people and organisations from all over the world.
- I would also like to thank **Annesha Kar Gupta**, who, as well as being a diligent Environmental Officer and carrying out the mandate given to her by our Policy Conference, has helped keep our website up to date, even though, since the start of the pandemic, she has been based in India. I'm sure you all find useful the Events calendar and access to recent editions of *Pulse* that Annesha keeps up to date on [unalaser.org](http://unalaser.org)
- More than a dozen branches have run a wide range of activities. I will highlight here a few especially noteworthy ones:
  - Twickenham and Richmond, with Wandsworth, included an event partnering with Amnesty International on *The Uyghurs of North China*.
  - Luton often link the local and global, such as their marking of Human Rights Day this week by focussing on *Homelessness* at all levels.
  - Harpenden's events included one giving a thought-provoking and original perspective on *Ukraine and Geopolitics*.

- Streatham and Clapham included an event to mark the *International Year of Sustainable Mountains*, linking to a remote community in the Western Ghat mountains in South India.
- Canterbury's activities included an Earth Day and continuing their work with others on promoting the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Bexhill and Hastings have used some meetings to develop a report, *If the United Nations Was Founded for World Peace, Why Is the World at War?* They are now consulting us all on how to take this forward.
- Westminster's events included one run with the Aga Khan Foundation to mark the UN year for *Celebrating Indigenous Languages and Defending Endangered Languages*; they also held a party on the central London UN Green, for the naming of which they had worked for many years; they partnered with RUSI and the Scottish Office to organise the moving 18<sup>th</sup> International Peacekeeping Ceremony at the cenotaph, with its associated peace conference.
- Climate and Oceans produced an influential *Youth Report* on Sustainability and Climate Change, as well as a remarkable video on regenerating biodiversity. They have also created an online COP27 video library. Their many events included an Ocean Symposium and working with groups around the world for World Clean-up Day.
- This is just a quick selection from the dozens of branch activities that have been publicised in *Pulse* this year. Some of our branches show amazing energy and imagination in their range and engagements; they win our heartfelt admiration. But we admire those, too, who focus more carefully, such as having coffee mornings to write campaigning letters or do an annual event with local schools. Please don't let the perfect in your branch aspirations be the enemy of the good.
- Several members of our Executive Committee are keen to help branches flourish. This can be in campaigning, awareness raising, becoming better informed. It might include building stronger local links, such as with colleges, think tanks or international commercial organisations or with a major international NGO with local branches like Rotary International, who have a lot in common with us and whom I think some branches might find a useful source of support in running the branch. (It's generally more successful to tap someone on the shoulder and say "I think it would be great to have you in our team" than to put out a general advertisement.) Please get in touch with me if you'd like us to work with you to help your branch flourish.
- And my final thank you is to You – **all our members** – who are the lifeblood and raison d'être of the organisation,

We should welcome a range of further contributions, such as with the website, with branch support, with engagement with young people, with suggesting (then leading) other regional activities. Do get in touch with me to take this further – but thank you for all you already do.