

## UNA LASER Chair's Report, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2023

### Global context of violence

The context for our work this year has been dominated by major wars, in which the UN has tried to bring peace and relief: Russia/Ukraine; Sudan (internal war, with more than 1million refugees to Chad alone); Israel/Palestine. We have tried to support actions by the UN to address these wars, including through our campaigning.

### 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.

Our Campaigns Officer, Valeria Minisini, led us in several campaigns. We also had a campaign led by our Climate and Oceans Officer, Gonzalo Alvarez. Topics covered were

- First, the political turmoil in Peru, where we campaigned for the protection of the threatened freedom of expression
- Secondly, Human Rights in the Holy Land, where we focused on the collective punishment being suffered by Palestinians on the West Bank. We supported a request to the International Court of Justice for an advisory opinion on the legal consequences of Israel's occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We also campaigned to safeguard the rights of publicly funded bodies to express their disapproval of the actions of companies or countries by using sanction and boycotts. The BDS (Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions) Bill prohibiting such behaviour is still going through parliament and we strongly and urgently encourage members to fight it through their MPs.
- Thirdly, the slow UN response to help the victims of the earthquake in Syria
- Fourthly, changes in UK aid, not only being decreased but being diverted to extravagant expenditure on the many asylum seekers caught in limbo as their cases were delayed and delayed.
- Fifthly, we urged the UK government to support the newly launched UN Oceans Treaty
- Sixthly, we pressured the government to stick to its Paris Agreement commitments on Climate Change, as well as supporting the Climate Coalition, of which we are a member, in its letter-writing and local community actions.
- Most recently we have urged the government to fulfil its Responsibility to Protect civilians from atrocities in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.

Details of all these campaigns are in the News section of our website.

In addition to being a member of the Climate Coalition, we campaign with other coalitions.

Recently we have joined:

- Stop the Inhumanity at Europe's borders, a collective demand for action coordinated by United Against Inhumanity to combat cruel and illegal treatment of refugees, asylum seekers & other migrants;
- LAW not War, a public education and advocacy campaign to promote and enhance Legal Alternatives to War, particularly the role of the International Court of Justice to resolve international conflicts, prevent war and strengthen the rule of law in international relations.

### Regional Councils

Annually we usually hold 2 Councils, as well as our AGM. This year, for our **Spring Council** we supported UNA-UK in its national **Policy Conference** chaired by Andrew Boakes. We had been looking forward to getting together as a national community, but, unfortunately a rail strike meant that the event had to go online. LASER branches were active in submitting resolutions and LASER members provided briefings on:

- *World Population* (Barbara Rogers and Keith Hindell)
- *Russian Invasion of Ukraine* (Suheil Shahryar and Peter Webster)
- *UN Plastic Pollution Treaty* (Gonzalo Alvarez)
- *Autonomous Intelligent Weapons Systems* (Ali Hessami)
- *Collective Punishment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (Brian Beeley and Antony Vallyon)
- *UN Declaration on Indigenous People* (David Wardrop)
- *Developing a new Agenda for Peace* (Antony Vallyon)

Next year we plan to hold our own Policy Conference on 9<sup>th</sup> March online and in this hall. Please send draft resolutions by 29<sup>th</sup> January; fuller details are in *Pulse*.

**Our Summer Council** was hosted by UNA Canterbury as a hybrid event. Those of us who went in-person were made very welcome by Valeria Minisini and her team; we enjoyed the informal discussions that zoom excludes. The theme was *The Sea of Hope and Darkness: Unpacking the Issues around the Rights of Refugees and Migrants in the UK and Globally*. Excellent speakers included:

- Fawzia Worsley with 2 Youth Ambassadors from the Kent Refugee Action network
- Lily Trapp of Care4Calais
- Richard Warren from the Kent Law Clinic
- Kay Marsh of the Samphire Project
- Elizabeth Ruddick of UNHCR.

This helped us put the situation in its global and legal contexts as well as sharing local community projects.

We are delighted that next year's Summer Council will be hosted by Bexhill and Hastings, in Bexhill, on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, on Peace and Security.

### **UN75 Building a More Secure World**

Our partner in our UN75 festival, Peacechild International, has extended our **Whatnext4UN** website to cover the Secretary General's vision, *Our Common Agenda*, with the build up to when progress to this will be discussed at next year's UN Summit of the Future. We encourage branches to build on the workshops and reports and agreed Actions from the festival.

### **UNA-UK**

The transitions in UNA-UK continues. The Outreach Officer is currently on maternity leave and it is difficult to make contact with headquarters staff. The new website is under development and we hope it will be launched by the end of the year. They have recruited several new trustees this year with some of whom we are beginning to work. Our two elected trustees, Tim Jarman and Dorothea Christiana, have held quarterly zoom meetings for representatives from branches/groups. Some of those branches are now exploring other mechanisms for branches and members to support each other and to enable new supporters to find branches, as currently UNA-UK does not do this.

### **Contributions**

LASER is very much a team effort and I should like to thank the many who are contributing to our Region's activities.

- Thank you to the **Executive Committee** for all their support.
- I would first like to thank the member who is temporarily standing down as his active and growing Group – about which you'll hear more later – takes all his time and energy: **Gonzalo Alvarez**, who will continue to be our Climate and Oceans Officer
- We are delighted that **David Wardrop** was awarded the MBE "for services to the United Nations and its Institutions"

- **Peter Webster** is our indefatigable Treasurer and Chair of the Policy Committee, as well as running, with his wife, Sarah, UNA Streatham and Clapham.
- **Jane Beeley**, as well as running UNA Tunbridge Wells and Weald, is our Regional Secretary
- **Suheil Shahryar**, as well as running UNA Harpenden, beautifies and posts out *Pulse* with great efficiency.
- 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 and is joining us now from Golgutta. 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)
- Our community of branches runs a wide range of activities.
  - We this year welcome a new branch – the Medway – which was launched last week on UN Day in Rochester Cathedral
  - Carrying on the cathedral theme, I would like to remind you that UNA Canterbury's annual Peace Service will be tomorrow (29<sup>th</sup>) in Canterbury cathedral at 17:30, focusing on the elimination of poverty
  - I'm sure you all find inspirational the range of branch activities publicised in *Pulse*. We shall hear more of some these this afternoon, so I won't describe more now. But please don't be intimidated by some of the remarkable and dramatic events; local campaigning coffee mornings or an annual event with a local school are also valuable. We are all volunteers and some of us have more time and energy than others. Don't let the amazing be the enemy of the good and just do whatever you feel you comfortably can. Please let me know if you would like to share some of your branch's activities at the AGM next year.
  - 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 and leading other regional roles. Do get in touch with me to take this further – but thank you for all you already do.