

General Secretary's address to GMB Congress 2021

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GMB General Secretary Gary Smith's address to Congress 2021

Congress, President,

I am genuinely humbled to be elected General Secretary and Treasurer of our great union.

It is the honour of my life. I am very aware of the great responsibility this carries, and I pledge to work tirelessly to ensure that you can, once again, have confidence and trust in the leadership of our union.

I would like to thank both Giovanna and Rehana for a comradely election. Putting yourself out there to make the case for what you believe in is not easy, I know. I look forward to working with both as we move forward to build our union.

I'd like to thank the fantastic staff who are working to bring us together in this digital space, so that we can exercise our union's democracy. Arranging and delivering Congress is a huge amount of work in the best of times, and I am very grateful for everything that everyone is doing for all of us.

And I'd also like to thank our union's recent Acting General Secretary Warren Kenny our President Barbara Plant and Vice President Malcolm Sage.

Warren's leadership steadied our ship in what has arguably been one of the most difficult periods in the history of our union. And what a way to sign off Warren as part of the team who got that agreement with Uber.

And Barbara has truly been the union's moral compass. And Malcolm, he is a rock for this union and a great comrade and friend to me.

I joined GMB at 16 as a gas apprentice, from young members activist to shop steward, organiser to national official, and then GMB Scotland Secretary. This union is my second family. It's educated me, it's been my hope and my purpose. I hold it dear as I know you do too.

And ultimately that's why this is not about me. This is about us, and what we need to do together to ensure that our union can afford a new generation of people the same hope



and purpose that we have been given.

We hold in our hands a very special gift: a trade union that can make a real difference to the lives of ordinary working people and their families. But with that power also comes great responsibility. That's why I want to be clear with you all from the very start.

We are a proud union, we are a great union, but we are also a union that's declining.

It's been a tough and, in many respects, an unprecedented year, but these events should not be used to hide a hard truth. Over the last five years we have been steadily losing our financial membership, a failure that has put the long-term future of the union in a precarious position.

The first step in solving any problem is recognising there is one. So, if we want to protect everything this union has built over the last 130 years, if we want GMB to thrive and prosper for generations to come, then we must accept now that our current course is simply not sustainable, and that we will come together to resolve this challenge together.

I will never accept decline is inevitable.

Wherever I've been in the union, we've campaigned, we've grown, we've fought and we've won!

As an official and senior official in Southern Region – we campaigned and we grew!

As a National Official – we campaigned and we grew!

And in Scotland – not only have we grown but we've rediscovered our purpose and learned to fight again!

Whether it's nationalising shipyards. Fighting over pay and pensions in the whisky industry.

Or organising that historic Glasgow Women's Strike – we've come together, we've fought and we've won!

The length and breadth of the Union every day we have extraordinary people doing extraordinary things. And now we're going to build on that and get our union growing again.

In terms of politics – let's be very clear, no favours and no fear – members first always!

As we discussed in the financial section, we need to make tough choices: we cannot keep turning up the dial on our existing membership - union dues need to be more affordable, not more expensive. Our members cannot pay the price for our failures to organise and grow the union as we should have.

It's also an inescapable fact colleagues, that I would not be addressing you today if others in our union hadn't lost sight of their own power and responsibility. It's been a wretched year for our union and our people on so many levels, but to see our union dragged through the gutter has been despairing and shameful. And it still hurts.



If our union does not stand for decency and equality, then we stand for nothing.

So, be in no doubt, we will implement the full recommendations of the Monaghan QC's report. I will work relentlessly with you and be guided by you and our President to make it happen. No ifs, no buts.

Never again can we lose sight of the duty we have to our people, and with a renewed focus on equality and justice, we will properly resource this process of change. The Women's Campaign Unit we will establish will ensure that our commitment to equality, including economic equality, is enshrined in our industrial work as we grow our organisation again.

We are a union of action, not words.

Everyone deserves to be part of a union that brings people together in good faith to build a better future. The journey will be hard as we rebuild our membership and restore our reputation. But I am hugely optimistic about our future because we have a huge advantage: we are in control our own destiny. We can decide our future together, if we organise and campaign like a good trade union should.

It's why I made three clear pledges to our members:

To fight for good jobs and proper pay;

to achieve pay justice for working women;

and to reduce the cost of being a member of the union.

Our future is about doing the hard work of organising, campaigning and fighting. And never being afraid of picking aspirational fights.

No employer is going to welcome us with open arms; there will be no political superheroes that will ride to our rescue; and there is no constitutional debate or settlement that will help us build.

If we want to make work better, then we must do the hard work ourselves. And hopefully as we emerge from the grip of COVID-19, we will have a relentless focus on the workplace, defending the interests of our members so we can secure the future of our union.

Great power and great responsibility are in our hands. So, we will organise. We will change. We will be different. We will be better. And we will win, together.

Gary Smith

