

A short report on the AIUK AGM, Saturday 14th April 2012

The AGM ran from Friday evening to Sunday lunchtime at Manchester university; it was attended by about 400 members (including representatives of about 100 local groups). I went for the day on Saturday, so I missed some workshops and discussions on Friday evening and Sunday morning, but I heard the main speakers and was present for the main debates.

The meeting was opened by Emin Milli, a blogger from Azerbaijan who was imprisoned for his human rights work last year and released largely due to pressure from AI. He said thank you to AI for our work and talked about the challenges he faced. He is in the UK for a year as a student and remarkably told us that he will go back to Azerbaijan in September. The next speaker was Jenni Williams of WOZA (Women of Zimbabwe Arise). Last year, the AGM saw a video message from her as she was unable to leave Zimbabwe at the time. This year, she appeared as a “surprise guest” and brought the house down with her remarkable tales of bravery by WOZA in the face of Mugabe’s forces of brutality.

Kate Allen, the AIUK director, and Ciarnan Helferty, the AIUK board chair gave reports on the work of AIUK over the last year. I was impressed by the number of positive, good-news cases they managed to fit in, although of course there were a lot of very sad stories too, especially the execution of Troy Davies. Kate Allen spoke well about her three trips to Egypt to support women defending human rights there. The treasurer, Brian Landers, gave a rather pessimistic report: AIUK is facing a lot of financial challenges because the charity sector is so competitive in the UK, the economic recession has affected charitable giving, and the government’s cuts to the public sector affect a lot of traditional AI supporters. We will do well to maintain our current size over the next two years, and my sense is that there will probably need to be some staff cuts because we are using up our cash reserves much too quickly.

In the afternoon there was a panel discussion on the Arms Trade Treaty: this is going to be negotiated over the coming months, and is scheduled to be finalised by the UN by the end of July: it is widely seen as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to achieve a breakthrough in controlling the small arms trade. ***The main message of the meeting is that we should arrange to meet our MP on this issue so that the Prime Minister senses the importance of the issue to voters up and down the country.*** Remarkably, one of the speakers was the woman civil servant who will lead the UK government delegation to the treaty talks. She was fairly open about the challenges coming up, but also moderately optimistic that in the end none of the permanent 5 on the UN security council will want to be seen as spoilers in blocking a decent treaty.

Later in the afternoon we all went in to the middle of Manchester for a demonstration/photo opportunity with lots of banners and candles.

The other parts of the day were devoted to discussing resolutions and voting on them. But they all seemed rather bland to me, largely stating the obvious and reaffirming our goals with polite requests for a bit more resource and priority in a couple of areas. I have the booklet which contains them all if anyone is interested in more details.

My overall impressions are:

- (i) It is well worth anyone attending the AGM for a day. It is wonderful to be with so many like-minded people, and to be re-inspired to keep working for AI.
- (ii) It is interesting that AI is actually focusing a lot of its work now on the “bread and butter” issues of torture, freedom of expression and freedom of association, and doing this by working for named individuals. Broader thematic concerns about “demand dignity” and so on, seem to be taking a lower priority as we focus our energies on the crises in the Middle East.
- (iii) The UK section seems to be in pretty good shape: the AGM participants covered an encouragingly wide range of ages, were fairly balanced between male and female, and included a roughly proportionate number of ethnic minorities, although I was disappointed that several posts on the board were not contested. I don’t think this is good for democracy, and unfortunately the nominations committee didn’t seem to be up to the job of getting more candidates. But this is a minor point overall.

Peter Pack
15th April 2012