



This edition of *Ambulance Today* is dedicated to the memory of our good friend Eric Roberts

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In tribute to our good friend Eric Roberts

There'll be one friend less at *Ambulance Today's* Christmas dinner this year because one of our guests, Eric Roberts of UNISON, has passed away unexpectedly.

Eric was the Secretary of London Ambulance UNISON's branch and for many years the chair of UNISON's national ambulance sector. He was also the President of UNISON - the first ambulance worker to hold this post. Despite his many achievements though, Eric remained a no-nonsense and friendly Scouse ambulance guy and a passionate Liverpool FC fan who cared deeply about his fellow ambulance workers. From the time when I invited UNISON to be a part of *Ambulance Today* before its launch, he gave me support, encouragement, and wise advice. Over the years he educated me in a very real sense - always warm and witty, he gave me many shrewd and thoughtful insights, explaining to me why ambulance workers across the world matter so much and why you should all be treated with care and respect at all times. It's people like Eric who have given all ambulance staff such a strong voice in the NHS!

Eric passed away suddenly at the end of November, having just been diagnosed with cancer. In the days before his passing I was speaking with him by phone and email about an interview we had planned with him for this very edition. Instead we'll be running a tribute to him in Spring. In recent months Eric worked tirelessly to fulfil his role as President of UNISON and despite the toll it must have been taking on him, he not once complained about fatigue or pain. On the contrary, I've never seen him happier or more fulfilled. For while he was rightly delighted at the honour of being voted UNISON's President, he wasn't egotistical and he didn't look on it as solely a personal tribute. He was just thrilled that this influential position allowed him to better galvanize those within UNISON and those they negotiate with in support of their membership. Eric's constant thought was: 'What issue must we focus on next to improve working conditions for the people we represent?'

It was another good friend (also a very popular figure within the UK ambulance service's staff-side) Maggie Dunn, who did me the great favour of introducing me to Eric. Though now long retired as UNISON's National Officer for ambulance, like Eric, Maggie has dedicated her life to striving for better conditions for NHS staff so she's stayed in touch with her ambulance friends.

Maggie and Eric were great mates. Both of them true unionists. Their friendship began when Maggie as a relatively new regional rep at the time of the historical ambulance dispute of '89-'90, needed advice and support. Eric, already highly-experienced and immensely well-respected across the UK union movement, responded to Maggie's request for help when she spotted that while a substantial amount of on-street fundraising was taking place successfully in London in support of the ambulance workers (many of whom were at risk of losing their homes due to the dispute), ambulance workers in rural areas weren't able to attract the same levels of financial support, due to lower populations. Without hesitation Eric, then NUPE branch secretary at LAS, immediately spoke with Roger Poole, the leader of the ambulance dispute, and together they urged the national fundraising

committee to ensure that all donations raised in big cities would be shared equally with workers in rural areas. To Eric it was simple: Good unionists look after their members equally because sharing care equally is the fundamental basis of socialism.

But Eric's commitment to ambulance workers didn't end with the ambulance dispute. He was also one of the founders of the roles of the modern paramedic and EMT, sensibly arguing that with the advances in clinical skills of frontline ambulance crews, to pigeon-hole them as 'drivers' sold them short. He was also a leading campaigner for gender equality in the ambulance workplace. Our Spring 2010 front-cover led on an article by Eric reflecting back on the dispute. You'll notice that while he's on the rostrum declaiming away with microphone in hand, he purposefully included female co-workers. Eric went on to lead successful campaigns to improve pay and promotion prospects for women workers in first PTS and Control and then across the board. To Eric it didn't matter what gender you were, it only mattered that your skills were recognised.

It was in '93 after the ambulance dispute that UNISON was created and Eric, Roger and Maggie all went on to achieve even greater things. Roger Poole, who became UNISON Assistant General Secretary, sadly passed away only last year, also of cancer. But he's still regularly fondly remembered by his many UNISON peers; as in: "Do you remember how Roger negotiated such-and-such during the ambulance dispute? It's a special thing when somebody dedicates so much of their energy and intelligence to helping those around them that they live on after they have passed on. As with Roger, I feel certain that Eric's warm but wise voice will live on.

Eric championed many causes over the years - too many to list. For many years he headed UNISON's Welfare Fund. In particular he was a loyal supporter of the Cuban ambulance service so when the news came over the radio just 48 hours after he'd passed away that so also had the elderly General Castro, who Eric admired, I was struck by the strangeness of this coincidence. Eric was a visionary who saw the irony of Cuba having so many highly-trained medical workers but, due to political embargo, scant physical resources. His sole focus was to ensure that Cuba received the resources it needed to operate a working ambulance system. After sending out a cargo ship loaded with refurbished ambulances he also helped upgrade their control system and obtain them donations of equipment and medicines.

You see: to Eric, it didn't matter whether you lived in Cuba or Catford. Whether you were a worker or unemployed. Just so long as you were in need or if you found yourself suffering under somebody else's unfair labour system - He'd be there for you... and no questions asked!

It only remains to say that myself and all the team here at *Ambulance Today* send our heart-felt condolences to Eric's family and loved ones. You are all in our thoughts at this sad time. Eric will be sorely missed by good ambulance people the world over because he made a huge difference - and how many people can you truly say that of?

Declan Heneghan
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