A life in crime (reporting)

DUNCAN CAMPBELL, a strong supporter of the Union, came to the February London Freelance Branch meeting to talk about his life in crime reporting. He told us it was a pleasure to be back in the Branch he first joined in the 1970s.

He had recently been at a memorial service for crime reporter Jimmy Nicholson – whose farewell marked the end of a “golden age” of crime reporting – at the Maggie and Sue mum pub opposite the Old Bailey. In the 19th century, court reporter Charles Dickens covered public hangings outside Newgate prison that could be viewed from the upstairs room at the Maggie and Stump. Crime reporting has an extremely distinguished lineage.

In those days, John Stevens of the Standard met detectives in a hotel off Grosvenor Square on Thursday nights with a pack of tenners. Newspapers got information. But when corruption allegedly “recycling” the drugs from busts. The Guardian reported that eight officers had been moved from Stoke Newington to eight different stations. It didn’t name them, and said it was not suggesting that any were involved in the corruption. Just before the then three-year limit for defamation lawsuits (it’s now a year) wrote to solicitors to the Police Federation, who’d won all of a run of 95 separate actions to defend members’ reputations. But Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger decided the Stoke Newington story was true and must be defended. He hired the “very tough” George Carman QC, who advised: always insist on a jury; and find someone in the jury you like the look of and deliver all your evidence to them. Despite Mr Justice French telling the jury; “you can award each officer £125,000...” they won 10-2.

As a result of the phone-hacking scandal it’s much harder to get information from police. News International, as then was, “dubbed in all the confidential email and phone contacts to avoid corporate prosecution. They acted as “classic grasses” and “poisoned the well” of confidential information. Now police careers are in danger if they’re seen just having a drink with a journalist.

“Always protect your sources.”

You will get fantastic support from the NUJ. “One great thing about being my age, Duncan said, “is that most of my sources don’t know how to use email. Brian Reader (jailed for the Hatton Garden heist) didn’t know the vilest of words and images.”

Our Branch at Women’s TUC

PROTECTING the rights of EU nationals and ensuring continued progress in equality legislation in the UK post-Brexit were top of the agenda for trades unionists at the TUC Women’s Conference 2017. For freelance and precarious workers at the event in London on 8-10 March there was recognition of the increasing pressures we face.

Raising her concerns about a lack of government support for women’s work issues, the Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, Sarah Champion MP, highlighted self-employment and zero hours contracts as a major challenge: “We know the labour market is becoming increasingly precarious,” she told the 300 delegates from 31 unions. “There are now nearly 1 million people on zero hours contracts and we cannot fool ourselves into thinking that women who are self-employed are having their rights protected.”

Motions highlighted the lack of maternity leave, or other rights enjoyed by employed workers, such as paid time off to attend antenatal appointments, for the self-employed. The four-strong NUJ delegation – London Freelance Branch members Maureen Paton and Magda Ibrahim, with Disabled Members Council chair Ann Galpin and NUJ Norfolk’s Cath Saunt – tabled a motion to tackle cyber abuse and its toll on women journalists. Cath Saunt told conference: “Women journalists and bloggers, generally strong women’s voices online, are especially prone to the vilest of words and images.”

The NUJ’s delegation at the Women’s TUC Conference. Left to right: Magda Ibrahim; Cath Saunt; Anita Halpin (former NUJ president); Ann Galpin and Maureen Paton. Photo © Natasha Morris