



2.45pm

Revive union festivals, say Benn and Bragg

Matthew Tempest in Brighton
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Tony Benn and Billy Bragg joined together today at the TUC conference in a bid to revive traditional trade union events such as the Durham Miners' Gala.

The two grandees of the Labour movement and Red Wedge respectively were lending their support to a new venture, Raising the Banners, to revitalise the dying tradition of such august festivals as Tolpuddle Martyrs day and Robert Tressell day.

Pointing to the success of the Leftfield at the Glastonbury festival - where leftwing speakers and musicians can attract crowds of thousands - singer Bragg called on the unions to raise their game.

Speaking at a fringe meeting at the TUC conference in Brighton, he said: "Ask yourselves this - 'why do Coca-Cola sponsor music festivals?'"

"It's because they know that it works. It works at raising awareness, and it might be the first time kids see the word 'Unison' - hanging as a banner over a stage with some musicians."

Mr Benn, now retired as a Labour MP but a veteran of over 40 years at the Durham Miners' Gala, told the audience of around 100 activists: "This is our equivalent of the establishment trooping the colour, or the changing of the guard. We have to celebrate our achievements like they do."

"We need to keep alive the tradition of public advocacy of human rights. We have to keep burning the two flames: of anger, and of hope."

Mr Bragg said events such as the Tolpuddle Martyrs day had been in danger of dying off in the 1990s. He said: "To be honest, it was attracting a crowd of under 1,000, and they were all men. And all old men at that. It was a case of refresh, or die."

He singled out the fact that all the festivals in the grouping - with the exception of Glastonbury - were free. He said: "That's what's so magical about them. They attract families, they have that wonderful afternoon festival vibe, like a big picnic, and then they're all done and over by 6pm."

The singer pointed out that the Leftfield, which he said in three years had grown from "a far corner of one field where we wouldn't disturb anyone else to a marquee that was pulling people away from seeing Oasis on the main stage this year."

He said Unison had achieved a notable success in persuading the Glastonbury organiser and farmer Michael Eavis to move away from purely supporting CND and environmental causes at the festival, into allowing some "real red politics".

He complimented the Tolpuddle Martyrs rally for "growing from a garden party to a festival" in the last three years, after seeing off the threat of terminal decline just a decade ago.

But he warned: "We need money. We need the best bands, the best stagehands, the best bars and the best security."

More music, more workshops and more seminars were the key to expanding union recruitment at such time-

honoured, but tired, events, he said.

For his part, Mr Benn said "New festivals are being born everyday. The February 2003 march against the war started out as a demonstration - then two million people turned up and it turned into a festival."

He added: "After I spoke I was interviewed by the BBC, who asked me if I was just a 'voice in the wilderness'? I said to them - there are two million people in my wilderness - how many are there in yours?"

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