



# Annual Report

March 2014

### Introduction

This report covers the period from April 2013 to March 2014.

It has been a year of action in the branch, as set out below. We have continued resisting the race to the bottom, forcing back attacks on our pay, terms and conditions. We have organised within workplaces, campaigned across the sector, and improved branch administration. Most importantly, we have continued providing crucial support to representatives who play a vital and leading role within their workplaces.

We hope that you find the report interesting and informative, and look forward to building on all these areas of work in the year ahead.

Suzanne Muna  
**Branch Secretary**

### Inspiring Action



Our members at **One Housing Group** took sustained action involving eleven days of strikes in total, but their persistence paid off. In November, management finally made an offer that was acceptable to members and which reversed some of the cuts that One Housing Group had originally intended to make. Management at the association had, throughout the dispute, made a series of concessions to the union but the members stood firm until they believed they had the best deal. This included restoring the bonus to supported housing workers.

The outcome of this dispute sends out a clear message that fighting back gets

results, and warns management in the sector that housing workers are no longer prepared to accept whatever employers try to force on them.

Unite members at One Housing, led by dedicated reps and activists, deserve a great deal of credit for their stand.



Equally inspiring has been our small group of dedicated fighting members within **Equinox** who also recently won a range of concessions following their sustained strike action. Equinox is a small employer, with staff dispersed across multiple projects, many lone workers and low paid frontline staff.

That they were able to achieve considerable mitigation of threatened cuts despite facing many barriers is testament to their dedication and fighting spirit. It should inspire others in similar workplaces who feel that organising resistance would be too difficult – as our Equinox members have shown, it can be done!

Early in the year, members at **St Mungos** won one of the best pay rises in the sector after threatening industrial action. Then, in the run up to Christmas, the employer showed a truly miserly and vengeful spirit when they reneged on an agreement to extend superior St Mungo terms and conditions to transferred workers at their Hitchin project. The project workers had been promised the new contracts in exchange for turning what was previously a night shelter into a 24 hour service. The workers delivered, but Mungo's management changed their minds and refused to stick to the agreement.



The housing association received unrelentingly bad press for its treatment of the workers, but instead of doing the decent thing and honouring their promises, the association threatened to withdraw from the services, which is now likely to move to another provider. Nonetheless, reps and the wider membership at St Mungo have been reinvigorated by the dispute and are currently considering their next move.

This sample shows that action brings results, even when the victories are not total. New members and reps come on board and the union is seen by management and members as a force that must be taken seriously.

Equinox, One Housing Group and St Mungo are just a sample. We also have disputes that are escalating over pay in the Homes and Communities Agency and Circle, and over other issues elsewhere.

But the greater the number of active workplaces, the more we can join up the struggles and present a united front across the sector. We therefore urge members to get organised. It doesn't matter how large or small your employer is, or how many members you start with, the branch will help you build and campaign.

Finally, we must of course also recognise, and pay tribute to, the hundreds of representatives and activists across the branch who daily help to improve the lives and working conditions of our members through their active involvement in negotiation, consultation, campaigning and casework.

### Branch Resources

Our branch of 2,500 members and over 100 representatives covers 140 different employers ranging from very small micro-employers to very large housing associations.

Supporting the representatives and reaching out to members is a key target for the branch, and we have used every available opportunity to do so.

### Branch Meetings

Our branch meetings are held on the second Tuesday of each month. These meetings are a vital forum for branch democracy, directing the Branch Committee's work to ensure that support is given where it is most needed. They are also an excellent way for members to link up and share their experiences and advice.

Branch meetings are open to all members, you don't have to be a workplace representative, and are friendly and reasonably informal. We would urge members to attend and we can pay for travel and carer expenses. Our thanks to Assistant Branch Secretary, Arti Dillon, for organising and providing secretarial support for these meetings.

### Website

Our website is one of the most important interfaces between the branch, the reps and our members.

We have spent the last few months working with Sue Singer of Singernet to develop a wonderful new website that will ultimately have much greater functionality and easier access to news and information than our much loved, but creaking current site. We hope members will keep checking the new site regularly for updates and resources as different functions are phased in.



Our thanks go to Sue for helping to develop such a great resource for the branch.

### Other Communications

The Branch has had a big push on using the widest range of communication media possible over the last year. We have an active Facebook group and a Twitter account (@unitehousing) with over 700 followers. We also send out a monthly email to those who have provided an email address.

Those who have provided mobile numbers also receive occasional text messages. These are particularly important when issues arise at short notice, so please do make sure we have your contact details. If you have not received emails or texts, please send your contact details to [unite.le1111@gmail.com](mailto:unite.le1111@gmail.com) so that you can receive these vital updates.

### The Housing Reps Handbook

In talking to our reps, it became clear that many are isolated in their workplaces and do not have fellow reps working alongside them and offering support.

To aid our isolated reps, we therefore took the lead on developing a Housing Reps Handbook, working with colleagues in Unite and other housing branches, particularly Riverside Group, Your Housing Group and Home Group. The handbook sets out the structure of the union, employment rights, how to organise, and a host of other advice and information.

The Handbook is now being printed up and will be sent out to all reps in the Spring.

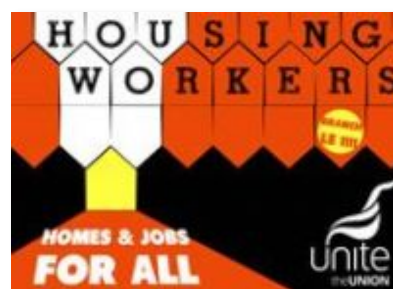
### Lay Representation

Not all workplaces have workplace representatives available to do casework, so the branch has continued providing lay companions who will take on individual casework.

Our team of lay reps have helped members with disciplinarys, grievances, TUPE issues, and a host of other employment rights, winning many cases for our members. Our thanks as ever to the representatives and to our Co-ordinator, Phil Rose for helping to deliver an essential service.

### Reps Forum

Not surprisingly, the increase in industrial action across the branch has been a considerable focus for branch officers over the last year. This meant that we were unable to hold any of our popular quarterly Reps Forums in 2013. However, one has now been planned for the Spring entitled *Transfers, Restructures, Redeployment and Redundancies*. It will help equip reps to manage the constant changes in our workplaces. The Forum will take place on a Saturday. The sessions are interactive and informative, and are intended to provide reps with the skills they need, and to encourage team-working between branch officers and workplace representatives. Please watch out for the Forum notice and book your place.



### Wider Campaigns

The Branch has recognised the importance of representing housing issues in the wider union and in key public campaigns.

### **Sector Standards Campaign**

Instead of racing to the bottom, this campaign aims to turn the tide by developing a set of minimum standards for housing workers. It is a long-term project that the branch has taken a leading role in developing.

Among other things, employers signing up to the Standards would agree to minimum rates of pay for generic roles, pension provision, training and support for employees, good practice on shiftwork and working times, and a separate dispute resolution procedure.

As part of the ongoing campaign, a statement of the Standards was produced and briefings have been developed for commissioners who play an important role in enabling service providers to treat their workers fairly. The next stage in the campaign will be getting employers signed up across the sector.

### **Unite Area Activists Committee**

Our members have continued attending the quarterly Area Activist Committee meetings in London which brings together all the activists from different industrial sectors in one area. In this way, the branch has been able to promote the work it is doing, and support others. Through the AAC, we have been involved in campaigns fighting blacklisting, the privatisation of health services, and cuts to housing benefit, welfare support, and legal aid. We have also worked closely with, and wish to thank, the Unite Community Branch, particularly on campaigns against the Bedroom Tax.

### **The Housing Forum**

This national body of Unite has met quarterly and is chaired by the Branch Secretary of the Unite Housing Workers Branch. It successfully brought together reps in our own branch and in other housing associations with their own branches such as Riverside Group, Home Group and Your Housing. It has allowed us to share good practice, plan campaigns

such as the Sector Standards Campaign, and develop resources like the Housing Reps Handbook.

### **Housing Campaigns**

The branch has been vocal in challenging the welfare and legal reforms through which the ConDems continue to demolish the welfare state. We continue to argue that capping rents, not benefits, would save public funds to a far greater degree, and that paying a decent living wage avoids the problems associated with low pay which has to be topped up with benefits. We have initiated or participated in protests and opposed possessions and evictions. Over the coming months, we will continue our fight for decent jobs and housing for all.

### **Democratic Participation**

Participating in the union's democratic processes means that the interests of our members can be better reflected in the way that the union uses its resources.



We have delegates on both the Regional and National Industrial Sector Committees and we sent delegates to Unite's 2013 Sector Conference. We did a presentation to the Community, Youth Workers and Not for Profit Sector Conference outlining the work of our branch, and proposed motions on more organising support, the co-ordination of industrial action, and on campaigning issues such as pay, pensions, and health, safety and welfare for housing workers.

Last but not least, Executive Committee member Kingsley Abrams, who is also the branch Equalities Officer, has helped ensure that our voice is heard at the highest level of the union.

### Unite Public Sector Pay Campaign

In the Autumn, we participated in a conference specially convened by Unite to bring together national sector committee members with a view to better coordination on public sector pay. Pay and pension provisions have been viciously eroded over the last few years so we welcomed this move by Unite and will continue to press for action which reverses the cuts.

### Branch Socials

Alongside all the hard work we took time out to let our hair down, and to chat and network in a less formal way. We held a summer social in August and the very glittery Strictly Union branch Christmas party. A good time was had by all!

Thanks to Vanessa Doidge, Social Secretary, and Arti Dillon, Assistant Branch Secretary, for organising both events so well.

### In Conclusion

It has been a year of unrelentingly hard work for our branch committee members, all of whom also have full time jobs or other commitments and responsibilities. Despite this, the strong organising approach taken by the branch has meant that we have been able to make an impressive impact within the union and across the sector, bringing housing worker issues to the fore.

This will continue to be our primary aim in 2014/15.

### With Thanks

Our thanks go to everyone who got involved in the last twelve months, whether as a member activist or in a formal role as workplace rep or branch officer.

Our special thanks also to the union officers who have been so crucial to the branch. These include our Regional Officer **Nicky Marcus**, whose boundless energy and enthusiasm has been essential and lifted our spirits on many picket lines. We would also like to thank **Peter Storey**, the new Regional Officer for Equinox.

The Branch has continued receiving vital support from **Peter Kavanagh**, Regional Secretary, and has worked closely and actively with **Sally Kosky**, National Officer for our sector.

Finally, Unite officers **Gina Osborne**, **Maureen German**, **Kerry Jenkins** and **James Lazou** have also been invaluable to the branch over the last year.

We look forward to working with everyone again in the year ahead.



**Chair** Paul Kershaw

**Vice Chair** David Oladele

**Branch Secretary** Suzanne Muna

**Assistant Branch Secretary** Arti Dillon

**Treasurer** Bryan Kennedy

**Political Officer** Kerry Feetham

**Campaigns Officer** Adam Lambert

**Communications Officer** Michael Ologun

**Social Secretary** Vanessa Doidge

**Equalities Officer** Kingsley Abrams