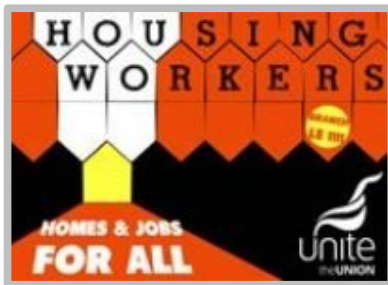


Unite Housing Workers Branch
(LE1111)



Annual Report

March 2013

Introduction

This report covers the period from December 2011 to March 2013. We have tried to keep it as succinct as possible, but this has been a challenge given the sheer range of activities we have undertaken as a branch – from organising within workplaces, to sector wide campaigns, improving branch administration, and providing support to representatives!

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.

Members First

In April and May 2012, we launched two surveys: one for members and one for representatives. Our aim was to better understand the issues of concern to both groups and so target the work of branch officers as effectively as possible.

The member survey was more successful, with a response rate of around 15%. We found for example that working hours had increased for more than half of respondents with no extra pay, and that more than three quarters had not received an inflationary pay increase in the previous two years. A staggering 80% considered work related stress to be a 'medium' or 'high' risk, and 40% belonged to the Social Housing Pension Scheme. The time taken by respondents in completing the questionnaire was appreciated, as it gave us valuable insight into member concerns.

The survey of representatives did not achieve a good response rate, possibly because reps are carrying the additional burden of their duties and therefore are more limited in spare time. Or, possibly, because they are more likely to be engaged in

other mechanisms for feeding back to branch officers. Although statistical analysis was impossible, the survey nonetheless provided useful qualitative feedback on the additional training and resources that reps wanted from the branch.

Thus, both the surveys were worthwhile and have helped guide the prioritisation of the branch officers' work in the twelve months since. The initiatives outlined in the remainder of this report were influenced by the concerns highlighted in the survey.



Supporting Representatives

Early on, branch officers recognised the need to meet with reps and activists within their own workplaces to discuss specific employer issues, understand more about workplace organisation, and identify what support Branch officers could provide. To this end, we met individually with reps and activists in Centrepoint, One Housing, Circle, Equinox, Look Ahead, The Housing Ombudsman, Mungos, Habinteg, and Peter Bedford.

In addition to these meetings, we have also organised the popular quarterly Reps Forums. These take place on a Saturday, and are intended to provide reps with the skills they need to be as effective as possible in their work, and to encourage team-working between branch officers and workplace representatives.

So far the Forums have covered a very wide range of issues, including

negotiating skills, understanding housing association accounts, TUPE law, building workplace campaigns, the organising approach, and developing pay claims. We have also had inspiring guest speakers who had mounted successful organising initiatives and campaigns, including Youth Fight for Jobs and Education, the Unite Leverage department, and British Airways Stewards and Stewardesses Association, which is now part of Unite.

Attendance at the Forums has generally been good, and the feedback from attendees has been overwhelmingly positive. We believe that this initiative has been instrumental in helping us move from a servicing to a servicing-organising approach within various workplaces.

The branch has also provided been involved in workplace campaigns within Equinox, Peabody, the Homes and Communities Agency, Mungos, and One Housing. This has often involved providing considerable support such as advice, administrative support, rank and file mobilisation, press and publicity. We anticipate that the number of workplaces engaged in struggle and requiring this type of input from the branch will increase significantly in the wake of the turbulence arising from welfare reform.

Sector Wide Campaigns

Our main campaign of the year has been aimed at introducing 'Sector Standards' to block the 'race to the bottom' that the commissioning process has ruthlessly promoted. Our intention has been to make members more alert to, and able to resist, the wider forces which manifest themselves in cuts to pay, pensions, and terms and conditions. The campaign also recognises the limitations of attempting to fight on

an employer-by-employer basis. Ultimately, the campaign hopes to win support for sectoral agreements on pay scales, working hours, shift patterns, and a number of other terms and conditions.

Shortly after it was agreed by the branch, officers approached our national officer from Unite, who took the campaign to a national level. This has been an enormous boost to member confidence in Unite's serious approach to the need to protect social housing and we are grateful for all the support, resources and creative input we have received from Unite on this campaign.

Our second sector wide campaign has been on pensions. Unfortunately, this has been less of a success story, and indeed represents a missed opportunity. Information provided on the revaluation of the Social Housing Pension Scheme was unclear and a promised dialogue with employers and SHPS failed to materialise. Nonetheless, this remains an important issue for members and we will continue to lobby for proper engagement over pension provision for members.



Finally, we recognised that there was a need for a health and safety campaign, with members facing not just with physical hazards, but workplace stress, fear of violence at work, and the increased cancer risk of night working. We put relevant material onto our website and produced a leaflet combining advice to members and to reps which was widely circulated. Finally, two representatives from the branch attended the Unite 2012 Hazards

Conference. We recognise the on-going importance of health and safety and are committed to undertaking more health and safety work at branch level.

Motions and Delegations

We have sought to extend our influence beyond the boundaries of the branch by submitting motions to regional and national committees and other bodies.

To the Regional Industrial Sector Committee, we have submitted motions on the housing emergency in London, supporting the campaign to reinstate Kingsley Abrams, calling for a General Strike, and calling for Labour Party funding to be targeted at those who oppose cuts.

When one of our representatives in Peabody was sacked, we passed an emergency motion through the Area Activists Committee to garner support from the Regional Committee.

We also used motions to give support to other bodies, for example Campaign Kazakhstan, and opposing the attacks on Remploi workers, both of which were supported with funds and publicity. We also passed a resolution on affiliation to the National Shop Stewards Network.

Officers from the branch have been elected to the Community, Youth and Not for Profit Regional and National industrial sector committees, and the Area Activists Committee. We have also elected delegates to Southwark TUC, Hackney TUC, and the SERTUC Disability Committee.

Casework

In a branch covering multiple employers, some without union recognition or any elected representatives, it is inevitable that

member representation has been heavily in demand. We introduced the Lay Representatives Protocol in recognition of the need to ensure that Lay Reps were both supported and accountable to the branch, efficiently reimbursed, and that opportunities for follow-up organising could be captured.

One of the key elements of the Protocol in fulfilling these aims was the introduction of regular Lay Representatives Meeting. However, we soon found that this support was in demand not just from lay representatives but also from workplace reps who were keen to benefit from the peer support that the meetings offered. We therefore opened the meetings up to workplace reps.



Branch Organisation

The structure of branch meetings was changed in order to make them as accessible and welcoming as possible. The branch meetings now start with a half hour informal welcome and light refreshments. We do not all work for a single employer, and it can be difficult to come to a meeting where you may not have previously met any other participants. Refreshments are also a necessity when people are coming straight from work or on their way to start a nightshift. The new structure does seem to have been a draw, with the branch meetings

outgrowing the space we originally booked for them!
Networking between the different 'shops' has increased over the last year. When Equinox representatives were issued with budget information from their employer, a One Housing Group representative supported them in analysing the financial information. When staff transfers were being organised out of Mungos to both Look Ahead and Riverside, the representatives of each organisation networked to ensure that on-going support was available to affected members. As the scale of attack on workers everywhere increases, stretching branch resources to the maximum, the role of the branch as a conduit for peer support becomes ever more vital and we aim to build on this work for the future.

Not neglecting the social needs of our members, we organised a highly successful Christmas party with a quiz, food and DJ. As always, we would like to thank everyone who helped to organise this event and make it such a success.



Branch Administration

We have sought to improve branch administration. We have introduced a new complaints procedure, a protocol for managing lay representation, and a revision to the branch Standing Orders. We also supported Unite in the recent rationalisation of branch membership. The Branch Secretary and Membership Officer have also been trained and are now able to access to the online membership database. In addition, the Assistant Branch Secretary has spent

significant time adding email addresses and phone numbers for members in order to allow easier electronic communication. Slowly, we are seeing the quality of our membership list improve.

Communications

Keeping members informed about the work of the branch, advising them of events and activities, maximising opportunities for their input and ensuring that they are able to participate fully in the democratic processes, all rest on the effectiveness of our communication strategies.

Good quality, timely communication has therefore been a key consideration in all the work that we have done:

- Regular monthly electronic mailings are sent to members and representatives;
- A hard copy newsletter has been issued once per quarter;
- Ad-hoc electronic and hard copy mailings have been circulated as necessary;
- We have improved – and continue to develop – our award-winning website, and keep this updated;
- We continually update the Facebook page and use other social media such as Twitter; and
- We are developing group-texting for more instantaneous communication.

We will continue to explore new methods for communicating with members and particularly value those which are interactive.

Conclusion

While this report offers just lightening overview of our work over the last year, it sets out a considerable range of activities. These remain necessarily divided between the strategic and reactive, yet in both cases, exceptional team-working by branch officers, workplace reps, activists and lay members have made the Unite Housing Workers Branch a fighting force.

The last twelve months have certainly been challenging. Cuts to our jobs, pay, and pensions, a squeeze on terms and conditions, and increased demands from ever more desperate clients have left many members feeling embattled, exhausted and demoralised. We know that the year ahead will be similarly pressured.

In response to these conditions, the branch has sought to create a rallying point in the struggle against the brutality of the current economic environment. We believe that we have frequently succeeded in achieving this aim, despite the odds that are stacked against us, both in the workplace and across the sector.

We will continue to devote all our available energy and resources to supporting individuals whilst building a collective strength through which we will win these battles.

With Thanks

We would like to thank every member who has been involved with the branch over the last year, and particularly those who have taken on workplace and specialist representatives' roles. The commitment of lay members and the considerable efforts of representatives have ensured that we have been able to continue fighting to improve the lives of workers in this sector.

We must say a special thanks to Jonathan Cox, our outgoing Treasurer, who has kept our accounts squeaky clean for the last decade, and ensured that payments are processed quickly and efficiently.

We would also like to thank Robert Taylor, outgoing Website Officer, who has helped us develop our website and thus create a vital showcase for the work we have done.

Both deserve the deep gratitude of our membership.

Finally, we could not have achieved nearly as much as we did without our Regional Officer, Nicky Marcus, and National Officer, Sally Kosky, who have brought not just support, but energy, enthusiasm, commitment and creativity to their roles.

We look forward to another year.

Chair Paul Kershaw	Vice Chair David Oladele
Branch Secretary Suzanne Muna	Assistant Branch Secretary Arti Dillon
Treasurer Jonathan Cox	Membership Secretary Kerry Feetham
Political Officer Bryan Kennedy	Campaigns Officer VACANT
Website Officer Rob Taylor	Social Secretary Vanessa Doidge

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