

A lot can change in a decade!

A farewell comment from our branch treasurer

It's time for me to bid a fond farewell to the Unite LE/1111 Branch. I have escaped the Big Smoke and moved to Coventry (some might argue this is not an improvement!). However, I feel ten years of work for the Branch has earned me a few column inches with which to have a last waffle at you all. My chosen topic? The last ten years!

Oh, I remember rocking up at my first Branch meeting, all innocent in the ways of the world. Wondering why organisations like Housing Associations and charities needed trade unions. It was a rude awakening! Within months I was representing colleagues, tussling over terms and conditions with HR, and generally feeling smug about the fact I was doing my bit to improve the lives of workers and their tenants / clients.

Over the past ten years lots has changed. Here's my top five!



Jon Cox

- 1) ANNUAL PAY AWARDS:** The first most noticeable change is in annual pay negotiations. Even just five years ago an annual increase of just 3% was a stingy offering worthy of ballot! Today, a 0% increase is sadly quite common and 2% is to be cheered.
- 2) SALARIES:** Certain eye-watering sights can be seen today that would never have been imaginable ten years ago. Some workers (particularly in the support sector) are having their salaries cut by up to 30%. Employers are saying they have to in order to remain competitive. But this would not have been even dared ten years ago.
- 3) STRESS:** Increasingly workers in our sector are being asked to do more for less. I know we are all lovely people and want to help our clients as best we can, but this goodwill has been increasingly exploited by employers seeking to cut costs. The level of stress in our workplaces has definitely gone up as a result, as our recent survey of members shows.
- 4) PENSIONS:** I have never in the past ten years seen a better pension introduced. Each time a new pension is brought to the table, it is worse than its predecessor. This is why it's important to defend every pension, because once the best one is bumped off, the second best will be next, and so on.
- 5) UNION MEMBERSHIP:** It's not all bad news! Probably as a result of the above, Union membership has been steadily increasing over the past ten years, and particularly in the last two years. Strongly unionised workplaces like St. Mungo's get victories which other workplaces miss out on. Ordinary people are waking up to the fact that you've got to be in it to win it. That is why I am leaving the Branch with high hopes for the future. Over to you youngsters! Keep up the good work, pipsqueaks!

Oh and you had better still invite me to the annual branch party. Union types are definitely some of the nicest people you could ever hope to trade dance moves with. And of course free booze is not to be sniffed at!

News in brief

- * Branch members at the Homes and Community Agency are balloting for industrial action on pay.
- * The 'bedroom tax' is causing increasing fear and Unite opinion research shows the public increasingly seeing welfare changes as unfair. The bedroom tax means increased workload for many members and changes their relationship with tenants. Send us your comments and experiences. The branch website will be reporting on developments.
- * Unite reps across the branch have been negotiating on pensions – changes to SHPS, auto enrolment and more - ask your rep if you have questions.
- * **AGM 12th March, and 9th April, 14th May**
- * **Work Your Proper Hours Day - Friday 1st March**
- * Thurs 2nd May 'The Thatcher Years' Exhibition opens at Richmix, London E1 with related events on Sun 12th May, including screening of 'Don't mention the 47' and Unite Housing workers workshop on 'How to fight the housing crisis?' and 'Radicals & revolutionaries of the East End' walk of the local area.
More info <http://dontmentionthe47.wordpress.com/> or dontmentionthe47@gmail.com



Housing Workers

Newsletter

February Newsletter 2013 - LE 1111



Pay increase offered by St Mungo's

Unite reps at St Mungo's are recommending acceptance of an agreement which will mean a much needed pay increase.

A St Mungo's rep writes: "Negotiations between the union team and St Mungos, combined with 'on the ground' engagement with the workforce, has resulted in real and concrete gains. An improved offer from St Mungo's on our 2012/2013 pay claim has just been achieved. This resulted in an extra £800,000 being won in total for the workforce, above contractual entitlements. This includes re-instatement of frozen increments for some staff, previously lost."

Pay rates in supported housing have been squeezed for a number of years while prices have continued to rise, so any pay increase will come as a welcome relief to St Mungo's staff. We will be looking to other employers in the sector to recognise the reality that their staff face in pay offers.

Unite housing workers branch chair Paul Kershaw commented: "It is really good to see that St Mungo's have taken a realistic position despite the pressures faced by this sector, recognising the real financial pressure that their staff are under. We will be looking to other employers to recognise the hardship faced by many workers in supported housing. Some employers are proposing actual pay cuts which staff fear will push them into real poverty or homelessness. Not only is this an unacceptable way to treat staff, it also endangers service quality, as has been highlighted by the recent report from Homeless Link. We call on them to withdraw such proposals and talk to Unite about stopping the race to the bottom in supported housing."

Race to the bottom

Unite is launching a national campaign against the "race to the bottom" in supported housing. Some employers are attempting to impose catastrophic pay cuts on their workers as part of a strategy of winning new contracts and growing by competing on price. An online petition has reached over 45,000 signatures calling for the establishment of agreed standards for the sector. Many respondents gave moving examples of the impact of the race to the bottom on services users. In Scotland Unite negotiates pay rates across the housing and supported housing sectors with employers. This takes wages out of competition; it establishes a rate for the job.

We regularly encounter proposed pay cuts when services transfer to new providers. They win bids by being cheaper and then make the budget stack up by cutting pay. The intention of the TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment) regulations was to stop this sort of things but providers use expensive lawyers to smash through this protection. An agreement would call a halt to this mutual throat cutting.

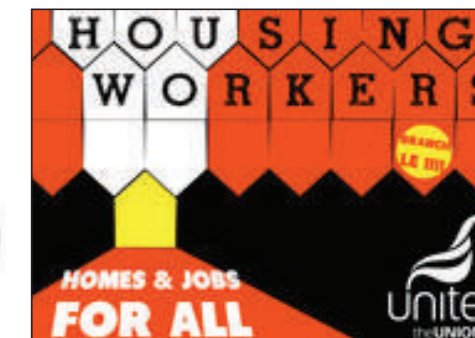
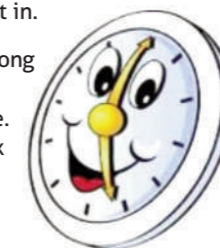
We call on organisations that might once have claimed to speak up for vulnerable groups receiving services to stop this race that threatens to undermine the care and support sector. Watch out for more on this campaign!

Work Your Proper Hours Day is on Friday 1 March 2013

If workers in the UK who regularly work unpaid overtime did all their extra hours from the start of the year they wouldn't get paid until 1 March 2013! The TUC has named this day Work Your Proper Hours Day and there is likely to be media coverage.

Now in its ninth year, Work Your Proper Hours Day is a light hearted campaign that celebrates the unsung - and unrewarded - hours that staff put in.

Last year, our survey of Unite housing branch members highlighted long hours and stress as major concerns for members. It will be a good opportunity for Unite reps to raise related issues in the workplace. In some workplaces in the branch reps are organising a 'stop work lunch' or other social events to mark the day. See the branch website for more information.



Support Staff at One Housing Group ballot for industrial action against pay cuts

One Housing Group CEO, Mick Sweeney, portrayed by Unite as The Grinch in a Christmas card to members, was named by Union News as one of the Top Ten Bad Bosses for his Christmas delivery of salary cuts of thousands of pounds for 250 frontline supported housing staff from February 2014. The cuts come against a background of huge surpluses for One in both general needs and supported housing and a hefty rise in pay and bonuses of £31,000 for the Chief Executive, Mick Sweeney, taking his income to £176,000-a-year.

Despite Unite members twice overwhelmingly rejecting One's proposals, management arbitrarily announced that it intended to dismiss and re-engage on vastly inferior terms, imposing salary cuts of up to £8,000 from February 2014 for those who sign up to them and with immediate effect for those who don't. To add insult to injury they have divided London into two regions; inner and outer, with staff working in "outer" London earning £1,000 less. Absurdly, boroughs like Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Lambeth are, according to One, in "outer" London.

Unite invited One management to ACAS in a last ditch attempt to resolve the situation. One declined.



Unite members at One are to be balloted for industrial action.

Regional Officer, Nicky Marcus told the press: "The actions of the management are breathtaking. Throughout negotiations, managers have consistently failed to provide any rationale, whatsoever, for slashing wages other than parroting, 'it's the market'. Managers seem unaware that they themselves are creating 'the market'; both in falling wages for frontline staff and, at the other end of the scale, in grotesquely inflated salaries for themselves. Loyal staff who look after the most vulnerable in society deserve to be respected and treated with dignity and decency by their employers. They have already suffered a four year pay freeze and an increase in hours whilst One racks up their profits. Enough is enough!"

Unite has negotiated an offer of a £800,000 pay rise for the workforce at St Mungos for the next financial year. One Housing Group has offered a £400,000 cut. One Support (on its own as a department) made a £1.2 million pound surplus on its contracts in 2012.

Equinox care report

Equinox joined in the frenzy in the race to the bottom in January 2013 with a consultation process that aims to reduce existing staff terms and conditions. Coupled with closing the pension scheme, contrary to assurances given last year, staff told us they had gone past 'shocked' and 'demoralised'. A jokey leaflet produced by Unite with a 'new year's message from a 'completely fictitious management' went down well. It started 'Did it ever occur to you that we have been over paying you. No seriously...' It was signed by 'a manger' on £80,000 / year. Many members face cuts of around £4,000 to £8,000 / year. The carrot is that if they sign up for the worsened conditions the pay cut will be a mere 10% for the first six months. Staff see this as a crude attempt at duress.

Members are facing hard choices between putting bread on the table and or buying travelcards to go to work. One member voiced their concerns that they 'would not be able to feed their children' on the terms and conditions that are being proposed. Similar sentiments are being echoed throughout the membership. Management justify their position by pointing to research by the consultants Cordis Bright. Staff feel the money spent on consultants would be better spent seriously addressing the impossible financial position they face.

Len McCluskey

After a full discussion in a branch meeting we nominated Len McCluskey to be re-elected General Secretary of Unite. Look out for ballot papers coming soon.



Unite rep, Teresa Santucci, summarily dismissed from Peabody after nineteen years employment.

Having been due to attend a routine performance review with her line manager, Teresa was, rather, ushered into the Chief Executive's office where she encountered the HR Director, who, with no warning, no note taker, no opportunity for Teresa to seek a companion or representative and outside all policies and procedures, dismissed her on the spot. Teresa was advised that the reason for the dismissal was that she and her line manager "didn't get on". She was asked to return her pass, told not to return to her desk and was accompanied off the premises.

Teresa was not in any capability procedure nor was she accused of anything whatsoever that could or had given rise to disciplinary proceedings against her. She does, however, have a disability, acknowledged by Peabody, which had recently given rise to ongoing correspondence between her and her manager and as a Unite representative she had naturally had a number of difficult communications with Peabody HR centring most recently, on being granted facilities time. It is Unite's firm and honest belief that Teresa has quite simply been victimised because of her disability and because of her trade union activities. In short, she was, in Peabody's opinion, proving to be problematic. We believe this because there is simply no alternative plausible explanation as to why Peabody and notably the Head of HR, whose role centres around the creation and upholding of policies and procedures and the fair treatment of employees, failed to follow all such policies and procedures; failed to follow all actions required of her by law; failed to even have as much as a discussion with Teresa about her relationship with her manager, who, incidentally, had had a friendly lunch with her just the day before.

Having decided, presumably, that the 'not getting on with the manager' scenario wasn't particularly strong, Peabody changed their stance, stating, "It was entirely due to her performance. Teresa's managers have tried, over a number of years, to tackle these performance issues positively and creatively. Regrettably, it has not been possible to remedy the situation". The fact that in nineteen years, Teresa had never failed an appraisal and was not and had never been in any stage of the Peabody capability procedure seems to have been overlooked!

With help from the Unite Area Activists Committee and Unite community members, our branch mounted a vigorous campaign for justice for Teresa, writing to the board, issuing press releases and leaflets, demonstrating outside the corporate headquarters and lobbying the Board meeting; all of which seemed to focus Peabody's attention on resolving the issue to the satisfaction of Unite.

At the time of going to press, four brave and committed members have come forward as new Unite reps at Peabody, the membership has increased significantly and Unite is meeting Peabody at Unite central office to negotiate a meaningful way forward for both Teresa, the members and the newly revived industrial relations at Peabody. Nicky Marcus Unite Regional Officer.



Teresa Santucci

In a recent Unite survey of staff, 0% considered Peabody to be well managed (!), and worrying numbers reported concerns over bullying, increased stress levels and other unacceptable features of their working lives.

Branch AGM

Our branch meetings are held monthly on the second Tuesday of the month at Unite House, 128 Theobald's Road, Holborn, London, WC1X 8TN. All are welcome and they are friendly events. The meetings start at 6.30pm but people gather for a snack and a chat from 6.00pm. The meeting on March 12th is an AGM where branch officers are elected.

Join us – and get colleagues to join

United we are strong; is everyone you work with a member? Ask you rep for application forms or visit our website: www.housingworkers.org.uk

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Keep up with news from the branch. Our website is updated most days with news and information.

