

Housing Workers

Newsletter



Spring Newsletter 2015 - Unite Housing Workers LE 1111

Welcome to 2015 and Unite Housing Workers (LE1111). One of the big focuses for this spring will be PAY and we've added an insert on the topic to this newsletter. Our front page covers the St Mungos Broadway campaign, fighting bullying at the HCA, an update on the campaign against the sacking of a rep by One Housing Group, and the bus workers dispute. We've also got a short article on what to do if you're facing disciplinary action, the Housing Association research on moving towards privatisation and back page of meetings, marches and manifestos!

Demand Better Pay! The fifteen biggest London associations alone made a £1 billion surplus – up from £644 million in the previous year. Pay for Chief Executives in the sector went up by 3.85% last year, comfortably above the inflation rate. But staff pay and conditions in housing are being squeezed. Branch secretary Suzanne Muna commented: *"This has not stopped associations from implying that they are on the edge of bankruptcy and/or must slash workers' pay in order to stay 'competitive'. Many members find it hard to pay rent and feed their families. Enough is enough."*

We call on all reps to engage with members on pay claims – if you don't have reps you can elect them! We want to know what you think about pay in your organisation – and contact us for assistance on your pay claim – **Paul Kershaw, Suzanne Muna** or your local rep.

**WORKERS
DESERVE BETTER**

PAY UP

Key Dates for your Diary

31st Jan	– March for Homes
10th Feb	– Branch meeting on the housing crisis, workplace reports and EC nomination
14th-23rd Feb	– Housing Action week
27th Feb	– Work your Proper hours
8th March	– International Womens day
10th March	– Branch AGM
21st March	– UN anti-racism protest



After a significant victory at **St Mungo's Broadway** in the face of a very aggressive management attack we are sharing some of the organising strategies used by the reps team in the build up to and during the dispute. *(Full information on the dispute in on our website)*

Member involvement – Ensuring that members were involved immediately following the announcement of the imposed changes was crucial. We organised mass meetings to make the following key decisions:

- A vote on whether or not to ballot for strike action and on the demands that we were making to management.
- A vote on the extent of the first strike action.
- A vote on the extent of follow up strike action immediately after the first strike was over.

Building towards a ballot – After a unanimous vote in favour of a ballot, union members were asked to volunteer to take part in phone banking to confirm accurate details of the membership as a whole. The process of confirming member details was then used as an opportunity to speak to members and carry the argument for a 'yes' vote. This resulted in a 70% turnout in the postal ballot and a 96% vote in favour of strike action which was important in giving our action legitimacy in the eyes of members, management, and the wider public.

Escalation of action – Members voted for 7 days of strike action at a mass meeting. This sent a message to managers that we were serious. And we were prepared to escalate the action again. We held mass demonstrations at head office at the beginning and end of the dispute. This gave everyone concerned a massive confidence boost right from the outset.

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SMB continued:

Leadership – The key decisions were made by vote at mass meetings. The day to day responsibility of decision making was passed to the Convenor and reps in the meantime. During the strike the convenor drew up a timetable of actions to ensure that members were drawn into activity. This included two demonstrations outside different local authority offices each afternoon where commissioners and councillors were targeted as potential allies.

A final word – Don't underestimate the effect that your action is having. Until the eve of the second strike, management at SMB had maintained that they would never give an inch to the union. And then they acceded to all our demands!

We want the message to go out to all workers under attack. **Strikes work!** *Jon Hughes, Unite Convenor, St Mungos Broadway*

Look Ahead – Fighting the Race to the Bottom!

Unite members at Look Ahead, led by representative Dom Rollin, have won recognition for Unite at Look Ahead's four Hackney projects. This is a significant victory and was conceded by management following the threat of industrial action. As reported previously, the seven-day strike threat also secured a repeal of plans to cut the pay of TUPEd staff.

Look Ahead has a long-standing but shameful reputation for undercutting other service providers to win contracts, then cutting the wages of frontline staff and making detrimental changes to terms and conditions in order to generate a surplus. In 2012-13, Look Ahead's surpluses reached around £12m. The organisation is also one of the wealthier associations with assets of over £1.3bn. Such practices are therefore wholly unnecessary.

The recognition agreement means that management will now have to negotiate with union reps over pay and any future proposed changes affecting members. Work at Look Ahead and want to get more involved? Lookaheadunitemembers@hotmail.com

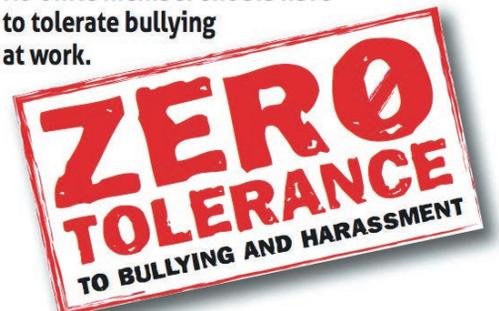
Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) – Fighting Bullying

Discrimination, bullying and harassment are areas that need to be taken seriously and stamped out by all employers, and the HCA is no different. In 2014, staff at the HCA were surveyed by their employer and an increase in those who have suffered or witnessed bullying and harassment was reported. If you are female, BME, or even if you work from home, you are more likely to be affected.

Following a number of individual incidents, Unite at the HCA, dissatisfied with the way such cases were handled, led a vote of no confidence in the employer's Respect at Work (bullying and harassment) Policy. Having met with a senior Director at the HCA, some changes were agreed to the handling of hearings. In the meantime, Unite will be keeping the issue on the agenda by pursuing a campaign called "The Red Card to Bullies". We are going to address some of the cultural issues through unconscious bias training, member discussions, and empowering members to tackle and intervene if they witness any such behaviour.

We need to have confidence in any policies and procedures; it is not just about the words, but about how effectively these are applied in practice. We expect all employers to be fully committed to a positive and supportive environment free from this unacceptable behaviour, and all members can play a vital role in making this happen. Together we can stamp it out. *Kerry Feetham and Suzanne Muna*

No Unite member should have to tolerate bullying at work.



One Housing Group – Seeking justice for Bryan

Former One Housing Group rep, Bryan Kennedy, was victimised and sacked by his employer last year, and is now seeking compensation via an industrial tribunal. It may be worth noting that Unite's solicitors only support cases they feel have a good prospect of success.

For all who supported the 'I'm Bryan' campaign last year there is still every reason, in spirit at least, to stand in solidarity with Bryan. We will, of course, update you with regard to the outcome of Bryan's hearing once this is known. *Michael Issac*

On the Buses – One rate for the Job

Picket lines were in place across London's 70 bus garages as over 20,000 bus workers in 18 bus operators who took part in a 24-hour strike in January to end pay disparities across London's bus network. There are over 80 different pay rates covering London's bus drivers, doing the same job on the same route but for different companies.

Branch Secretary Suzanne Muna visited one of the unite picket lines, expressing support from this branch, "In many ways the dispute is part of what we are demanding with **Sector Standards** in Social Care and Housing, ie. decent pay and terms, instead of a toxic race to the bottom. Solidarity to all strikers!"



Did you know the London Living Wage is £9.15 per hour, £19,032 (40 hour week) or £16,653 (35 hour week)

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Are you being victimised or about to be disciplined by your employer?

Phil Rose a lay rep for the branch has brought together some of his learning points from the large number of cases he has been involved in, particularly after noting an increasing number of complaints from members of being hauled up for disciplinary action over trivial or non-existent matters.

If its happening to you, here is what I would suggest:

- Contact your union rep or branch officers for support.
- Keep all evidence
- Note the names of any witnesses, and make a full written note of what they witnessed as soon as you are able.
- A chronology of events is very convincing evidence; try to write up as things go on
- If you are asked to do something that you don't believe is reasonable or within your job description write to the manager and ask for the instruction in writing. You must follow reasonable instructions.

If you are facing a disciplinary:

- An employer is obliged to have a Disciplinary Procedure and should follow it. Get a copy and read it.
- Before taking any action employers must investigate the facts. This investigation should include you and give you a right to give your side of what is being investigated. You do not have a right to be accompanied at this stage but some employers allow this.

If the matter moves onto a Disciplinary hearing:

- You have a legal right to representation in a Disciplinary or grievance hearing.
- The employer is obliged to write stating the charges, the date and time of the hearing, that you are entitled to be accompanied.

The full article will be on the website & you can find guidance online – <http://www.acas.org.uk/dgcode2009>

"Some of our bosses are keen on privatisation"! No seriously...

"Housing associations will be set free to roam as private companies. There is no doubt in my mind about this... This is a juicy steak one millimetre away from a slavering dog's mouth. I am of course putting aside the morality. But money is talking. And the politicians will listen to it in the end. Privatisation is going to be a done deal." So writes the well known housing consultant Alistair McIntosh commenting on a recent report from the think tank Policy Exchange, which has a track record of influencing Tory policy (24 dash.com 6/1/2015).

The report is sponsored by G15 housing association Genesis and follows consultation with association bosses. McIntosh observes *"Some of our chiefs are really keen on privatisation"*. The idea might seem crazy but it has serious backing.

Policy Exchange claim that a *"byzantine system of regulatory rules and financial constraints"* is preventing housing associations from building 100,000 homes a year. Associations would buy out their debt at a 50% discount and proceed without grant. They would then be 'free' to sell properties without consent and to set their own rents, and they would be free to choose their tenants rather than taking people on the basis of need referred from local authorities. This would be another massive privatisation of public assets at a knock down price. The banks have repeatedly said housing associations get cheaper borrowing because of the assurance they take from regulation by the HCA and tenants would lose another defence of their rights so who would privatisation benefit? A government might well be attracted to reducing the deficit by selling off the family silver at half price. It would benefit the fat cats and would harm tenants and housing workers.

Housing Association bosses have been known to look longingly at the multi-million pay packages of their private sector opposite numbers; could that influence their judgement? McIntosh bluntly predicts a *"battle royal"* for front line staff to get a living wage, higher rents, more evictions and a worse service for tenants.

House building has fallen to its lowest level since the Second World War. In 2012 Housing associations in England built 27,460 homes while last year they built just 21,770, and most of these were so-called 'affordable' homes which get a much lower level of grant, have higher rents than social housing (for affordable read unaffordable) and therefore create a bigger burden on the housing benefit bill. This wasn't due to a sudden onset of regulation. Associations have actually had less not more regulation in recent years. The fall in house building had much more to do with massive cuts in housing investment.

Currently, Housing Associations have £45 billion of historic grant on their balance sheets and £52 billion of debt. Their stock is worth over £300 billion. Policy Exchange proposes a 50% discount so £45 billion investment would be sold off for about £22.5 billion. What impact would this have on associations and their tenants? Associations would be £22.5 billion more in debt; this and the reduced assurance from regulation would put up borrowing costs. The Council of Mortgage Lenders have repeatedly emphasised the importance of regulation by the HCA. There would be nothing to stop associations squeezing tenants in response. And as McIntosh suggests *"Something is bound to go wrong. It always does. Then the good old taxpayer will rescue the company and we will be right back where we started."*

At one time the 'housing association movement' might have been a clear voice for more social housing and more investment. Not any longer. Unite housing workers will have a role in developing that voice. *Paul Kershaw*

There is an edited version of a longer article on our website.

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Meetings, Marches & Manifestos:

Branch Meetings

Tues **10th Feb** – Housing Crisis Speaker from Focus E15 or New Era, as well as workplace reports and nomination for Unite Executive.
Tues **10th March** – Annual General Meeting, updates on branch work and also elections of branch officers. (Venue TBC)

Branch meetings have also been scheduled for Tues **14th April, 12th May, 9th June, 7th July**. August will possibly be a more informal social event. We start with light refreshments at 6pm, formal business 6.30pm-8.30pm. Meetings are usually at Unite HQ, 128 Theobalds Road, WC2H (Level access). *We email minutes, agenda and confirm venues and dates by email a week before.*

March for Homes

Sat 31st Jan Noon – We will have the branch banner at St Marys Churchyard, Elephant & Castle, SE1 by E&C tube at 12 noon, a second leg of the march will also go from Shoreditch Church, Shoreditch High St, E1 at noon, and both marches will converge at City Hall around 2pm. Join us! **Demands include:** Rent control, hands off council housing, affordable and secure homes for all, cut rents not benefits, build new council houses, and more. See the website for fuller details and how to get involved: <http://marchforhomes.org>

Housing Week of action from 14th Feb (Unite Community with Radical Housing Network)

London's Mayor is the single most powerful politician in London when it comes to housing. He is responsible for producing the statutory London Housing Strategy, has over the last four years controlled a budget of £1.8 billion for delivering new homes, and holds a land portfolio that covers over 600 hectares of London (the size of c800 international football pitches) and extensive property. This money and power over housing is being voted on at the final budget setting 10am, 23rd Feb. Join us at this mass protest from 9am!
Full details of a week of action will be out soon, keep an eye on our website and <http://radicalhousingnetwork.org/>

Work your proper hours 27th Feb

International Womens Day 8th of March

UN March against Racism 21st March

Manifesto

Housing issues will be debated during the build up to the general election in May 2015. In the branch we want to make sure our voices aren't ignored. We see daily the devastating impact of the housing crisis on tenants and service users, as well as workers in the sector, but there is a big gap between our experiences and what the politicians say.

Homelessness is rising but services are being cut. Yet politicians discuss the lack of new affordable housing as if it was a mystery! Less than ten per cent of the population actually oppose rent control in the private sector, but none of the establishment parties supports rent control – Unite does. Unite also calls for massive investment in social housing and ending cuts.

We don't just call on government to take action. The union is committed to support councillors who vote against cuts. Housing campaigns around London like the E15 mums and the New Era tenants have had real successes. Now let's get a housing policy for people not profit on the agenda. We will have our manifesto out very soon and aim to promote this with councillors, MP's and candidates. If you'd like to get involved contact Paul Kershaw.



Education and Training: New TUC guides on the new maternity and paternity rules are out. Figuring out how to share maternity leave and pay has been made easier with the publication of two new booklets. (*See our website news section.*)

Also check the Unite main website (www.unitetheunion.org – section 'growing our union') which has regular training for reps and members. We can also arrange customised workplace training or discussions, just get in touch with *Suz, Paul, Arti or Adam*

International: *We supported the Kurdish resistance in KOBANE against ISIS, and we affiliated to Tamil Solidarity www.tamilsolidarity.org/*

Contact Us

Suzanne Muna, Branch Secretary: suz.muna.unite@gmail.com – 0796 885 2255

Paul Kershaw, Branch Chair: kershawpaul@hotmail.com – 07980448641

Arti Dillon, Assistant Branch Secretary: Unite.LE1111@gmail.com

The rest of the Branch committee are: *Catherine McDonagh, Kingsley Abrams, David Oladele, Vanessa Doidge, Candy Maria Terra, Kieran Duffy, Jenny Mair and Kerry Feetham.*

Our new Regional Officer is **Adam Lambert**

(Adam.Lambert@unitetheunion.org) covering all organisations except Thames Valley and Equinox which are covered by **Peter Storey**.

Gina Osborne supports Adam and Peter, particularly with updates to membership records (gina.osborne@unitetheunion.org).



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