

Housing Workers

Newsletter



Autumn Newsletter 2014 - LE 1111

This is the Unite Housing Workers LE111 Branch Autumn newsletter we report on important workplace wins, some ongoing campaigns and the bigger battle against the race to the bottom in the housing and social care sector which demands an alternative. The growing housing crisis with lower paid and overworked workers is not how it has to be. Join us in the fight for Sector Standards.

Unite Defeat 14% pay cuts at Look Ahead

There has been a stunning eve-of-strike victory for Look Ahead Unite members. After weeks of negotiation and an escalating threat of industrial action, with a seven day strike due to start following day, members working in the four Hackney Look Ahead services were finally made an offer that they considered acceptable – and what a victory!

The affected members received cuts to terms and conditions of 15% just a year earlier, and had recently been threatened with further pay 14% cuts, represented by a reduction of front line roles and demotion into de-skilled roles with significantly reduced wages.

Yet on the eve of a planned 7-day strike, management caved and offered guaranteed redeployment or retention on existing terms for those wishing to stay, enhanced redundancy for those wishing to leave, and trade union recognition for Unite in their Hackney services.

The branch congratulates Unite Look Ahead workers who have done an amazing job in halting this particular attempt at a race to the bottom. This victory shows what can be achieved when members stick together and have the confidence to make a stand – and if our members in Look Ahead can do it, others can too. *Unite Rep at Look Ahead: Dominic Rollin.*



St Mungos Broadway Ballot – Vote YES!

Over Christmas, Unite members at the St Mungo's Hitchin service took 19 days of strike action after management reneged on an agreement to assimilate the staff, who had been TUPE'd into the hostel onto St Mungo's terms and conditions. Shockingly just under a month after the initial strike action commenced, St Mungo's decided to withdraw from managing the hostel. Unite national officer for the not-for-profit sector Sally Kosky said: "*It is unprecedented for St Mungo's to walk away from a profitable contract. Our concern is for the homeless of Hitchin and the future job security of our members.*"

However, the argument for decent terms & conditions for our members in Hitchin was eventually won, resulting in significant increases in pay and leave entitlements. Then, after the local authority stepped in to find an alternate provider, the new provider upwardly harmonised the of the rest of their staff to St Mungo's levels. There were just five staff at the Hitchin project – all Unite members – so it is worth reflecting, if that's what five people can do, imagine what the full membership, a majority of staff in Mungos, can achieve.

Following a merger with Broadway and a new senior management team which appears hell-bent on breaching agreements and slashing staff terms, further – mass – industrial action at St Mungo's Broadway is likely to be necessary. The new regime is attempting to remove collective bargaining and use of NJC pay scales to solely follow market rates, meaning pay cuts for everyone except those at the top. The same day that St Mungo's Broadway announced 10% cuts in pay for new front line workers (which will soon be the rates used in re-structures), One Housing Group announced almost identical cuts. Changes to terms and conditions, as well as changes to policies and procedures, are being imposed without any attempt to negotiate. In what has sinisterly been labeled a "*retrospective consultation*". The intent to union-bust is clear. In an immediate response, a packed-out union meeting was called, with members volunteering in their droves to assist the campaign. The spirit of members in wanting to resist the changes being steam-rolled through has been outstanding.

Unite at St Mungo's Broadway demands: *No new terms and conditions without the agreement of Unite; retention of the NJC scale; upward harmonization of Broadway staff to agreed St Mungo's rates where applicable; no further "entry-level" roles. Also, management must abide by agreements made last summer regarding the introduction of Support Assistants and Housing Management Assistants, with meaningful involvement of Unite in job evaluation procedures; jobs to be re-evaluated only where there is an agreed significant change to role and responsibility; no changes to policies and procedures without prior negotiation with Unite; We must all now defend Unite recognition rights, number of representatives and facility time.* Contact Adam Lambert, Unite Convenor at St Mungo's Broadway at smbunite@gmail.com

Wednesday 14th October will see over a million Unite, Unison, NUT and GMB members in the public sector strike for a pay rise. As ever we urge our members to support the action and coordinate their own strikes for the same day. Also visit picket lines and join protests. We will join the national protest on Saturday 18th October so let us know if you'd like to march with us.

Given the strike action and demonstration will be huge, this is an excellent time to raise awareness of pay in your workplaces. We also have a branch meeting on the 14th October to update further. There is also a lot of information worth sharing on Housing Associations Surpluses.



Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)

In Spring our members at the HCA took three days' strike action over the pay allocation. Management were refusing to discuss this key issue and were (inevitably) claiming that their offer was the best that could be made. Members disagreed: "We are getting increasingly desperate – trying to make ends meet, with rising costs year after year, but some will not get a single penny in pay increase – again!" Suzanne Muna, HCA representative and Branch Secretary.

The budget restrictions don't reach everyone however. The HCA's accounts show that the Chair of the Board got £87k (p/t), and the Chair of the Regulation Committee £65k (p/t). One Executive Director's salary of was way over £165k. This meant that some Directors at the Agency received in one month an amount not far off the amount paid to more junior staff for six months' work. HCA members also coordinated their action with other unions over pay, helping to link their struggle to a wider resistance against austerity measures which help the rich get richer.

Despite claims that there was nothing more to discuss, management were brought back to the negotiating table by the strike and are now discussing an improved offer. Although there are three recognised unions at the HCA, Unite was the only one that was able to organise industrial action, significantly raising the union's profile at the employer. *Suzanne Muna, HCA representative and Branch Secretary.*

Hands Off Unite! Re-Instate Bryan Kennedy

On June 17th, the lead convenor at One Housing Group (OHG) was sacked. It is clear that Bryan has been victimised for his trade union activities. In 2013 Unite fought a battle over sickening reductions in salaries of frontline workers (some up to 30%) despite record surpluses and pay rise of £30k for the Chief Executive. As lead convenor, Bryan Kennedy led the struggles to mitigate the suffering that the association was inflicting on its hardworking staff. Bryan was suspended on the eve of an important meeting with management over general pay and challenges to night shift workers currently on £3.79 per hour.

OHG members, the housing sector and wider community have given considerable support to the campaign. Eight days of strike have now taken place, and we've recruited more members. As a branch we have organised two lively protests outside OHG head office, and set up online protests and meetings. However, in the process of talking to members about the campaign we have also heard serious issues around bullying and a survey is currently being carried out. Members, please add your voice!

Islington council also expressed their support for the campaign through a motion, and may follow up with other action. Islington withdrew from a contract with Kier (a company known for blacklisting) just a month ago, and is developing a reputation for decisive action against victimisation. Much more information, updates and details of how you can help can be found on the branch website under campaigns 'I'm Bryan' bit link <http://bit.ly/1gCKmk1>

Reps at OHG are Maria (Candy) Terra, Richard Anderson and Mark Heavan H&S



Top: Labour Cllr James Murray Islington Council spokesperson for Housing. Bottom: The Unite picket line at OHG

Sounds Shifty to me!

Congratulations to our reps and members in the Peabody Revenues Team who recently made an inspiring stand against ill-considered proposals to change working patterns. Following an away-day discussion earlier in the year, Peabody announced that 'flexible working' was to be introduced for the team on a trial basis. This was to enable office cover from 8am to 8pm. Staff were assured by management that, initially at least, working the new hours would be voluntary, although they conceded that it could become mandatory if the pilot was deemed a success by management. Upon closer examination of the proposals, members realised that the only 'flexible' element in the proposal were different start and end – it wasn't flexible working at all, it was a shift system! Unite reps quickly responded to member concerns and raised them with management and HR. They organised a meeting for all affected members and put the question to a vote – a massive majority rejected Peabody's shifty 'flexible working' plans. In the light of the evident determination of Unite members, Peabody took the sensible decision to drop the pilot. Well done to all! Reps at Peabody are *Arnold Smith, Catherine McDonagh, Samkelis Mabhena and Lorenzo Amisano.*

Next Peabody meeting: Tues 2nd Sep, 12.30-1.30pm, upstairs at the Albert Arms, 1 Gladstone Street, SE1 6PY (off London Road and St Georges Road)

Race 2 the Bottom?

The accelerating race to the bottom in terms and conditions in the social care and housing sector have finally hit the headlines. Revelations about the impact of **zero hours** contracts, non-payment of the **minimum wage**, scandals about care quality and public debates about the need to “tackle” social care by bringing it together with NHS have all been mainstreamed these last few months. In August, the Observer ran a three page spread on a long running pay dispute in Care UK with its editorial declaring that “*a fair society should prize its care workers*”. These articles are reflecting a popular mood; that the social care system is not working and that there is wide support for the fight to improve pay and service standards in the sector.

As Chair of Unite’s London housing branch I regularly deal with members facing severe pay cuts, often of several thousands of pounds, unable to pay their rent and often in extreme distress. Sadly, when we raise the need to explore an alternative approach our negotiators are all too often subject to lectures about ‘the market’. We say that for employers to trample over their staff while cutting each others’ throat to win contracts on price, not only hurts their staff, but undermines the vital services the staff provide. Our members often tell me they are shocked by the contempt that some of the new generation of executives show for real issues of service quality; their priority being cost saving and boosting the surplus.

Such behaviour is expected from organisations like Care UK, owned by a tax avoiding private equity company, but sadly some ‘not for profit’ housing associations that we deal with behave in exactly the same way. At One Housing Group our members took sustained industrial action in response to proposals to cut the pay of front line staff by up to £8000 per year. At the same time the Chief Executive, Mick Sweeney has been regularly increasing his pay year on year. We were able to come to an agreement which moderated the impact of pay cuts, but then they took retribution by sacking Unite rep Bryan Kennedy. Staff have taken two sets of four day strike action in protest. It should be noted that a few years ago the same organisation was involved in a victimisation dispute following the sacking of Unison rep Debbie Cordrey. Before strike action for our rep, Unite’s regional secretary in the London and Eastern region, Peter Kavanagh, wrote to the One Housing Chair Anthony Mayer asking to discuss the industrial relations problems of the organisation with the hope of averting the need for strike action. Mr Mayer did not reply himself and the organisation sent a short letter dismissing the chance to talk.

Mayer has spoken of his “huge admiration” for what the Government is trying to do (24 dash August 2012), Mick Sweeny the CEO has spoken at Conservative Party conference calling for reduced regulation, and the organisation boasts of being able to undercut directly provided NHS services by 80% – their corporate positioning is clear. But the harsh internal culture that suppresses internal dissent and questioning is perhaps more concerning in an organisation working with vulnerable clients. Sacking union reps is part of this. The culture can be glimpsed from disciplinary cases that we handle and is revealed in responses to a survey on bullying carried out by Unite. **70% of respondents said they were subject to bullying.** Workers report anxiety, fear of going in to work, refusal of reasonable requests for leave, threats etc. A common feature of recent abuse cases has been a lack of staff ‘voice’. A clear danger of this culture is that it will adversely impact on care and support for the community.

Such behaviour is increasingly being felt elsewhere. For example recent moves within St Mungos Broadway, the newly merged homelessness agency to impose changes and cut pay are a worrying sign that previously more responsible employers are moving in the wrong direction. The new management seems keen to trample on agreements and cut pay. We are clear that we will stand by our members and fight to reverse this tide.

Trade journal Inside Housing (July 2014) ran a recent feature highlighting the growing amount of industrial action taking place in the housing sector, quoting an unnamed senior figure in the sector as saying that Unite has become more “aggressive”. We feel that the reverse is true. More often than not, our attempts to negotiate are rebuffed or fobbed off by intransigent management. In these cases we are left with no option but to take strike action.

There is an alternative. We are calling on employers and commissioners to talk to us about developing a national agreement to protect **Sector Standards** and to bring an end to competition by wage cuts. Employers sometimes tell our negotiators that they regret pay cuts and are concerned about the impact on services. They claim they have no choice because their competitors are doing the same. A national agreement on sector standards would mean that workers were paid the ‘rate for job’ and would put a stop to the race to the bottom. In Scotland a national agreement already exists with Unite; why not an agreement in England and Wales? If ‘social housing’ providers would remember their claimed social purpose this could be a possible through Commissioning bodies and local councillors. They can question carefully whether the organisations they use have appropriate staff management and remuneration policies, or whether they should consider taking outsourced services back in house. They can also cancel contracts and refuse to commission from organisations that treat their staff badly. Housing cabinet member, Councillor James Murray, has now written to One Housing expressing concern at the treatment of our rep Bryan Kennedy and the organisation’s wider behaviour after Islington Council unanimously voted for this action.

Islington council took an important step showing what power local authorities still have. In fact they have gone further recently with Kier (who have blacklisted trade union members) and withdrawn the contract, taking it back in house. It is time more councils followed suit, and seriously challenged rogue employers and practices which undermine workers’ rights, and which create an unstable and fragmented sector which is not fit to work with or respond to our communities’ needs.

Join us in the campaign for Sector Standards. Demand your local council sign up and begin to promote and implement an alternative. You can find further information and briefings on the Unite website: <http://bit.ly/SectorStandards>

Diary

Branch Meetings

Tuesdays Sep 9th, Oct 14th, 11th Nov and 9th Dec

Branches usually take place on the second Tuesday of each month. We have a more informal start with light refreshments at 6pm, formal business between 6.30pm and 8.30pm. Meetings are usually at Unite HQ, 128 Theobalds Road, WC2H (level access).

Please check the venue first via the email we send out a week before, in case of changes. *If you don't get an email please send us your details to Unite.LE1111@gmail.com with your name, address, job title & workplace.*

Sunday 14th Sep

Cut Back or Fight Back?! @ 12 Bar Club, Denmark St, WC2H 8NL

One of our fantastic members, aka *Mistah Selector* has arranged a gig with several bands including *Shocks Of Mighty!*, *Actual Crimes*, *Smiley (of Smiley & The Underclass)*, *Big Joanie & DJ's Miss Chazmatazz & Swingin' Kitten* and *Nick Hydra (Hydra)* with *Smiley* also up for a DJ set. *Richard Anderson* will also perform 'I'm Bryan'.

We've been striking and fighting hard against cuts and injustice across the sector and more widely and we need to raise the profile of the campaigns and also raise some dosh £££. Donations on the door but we'd appreciate a minimum of £3. Bring yourself, your mates and enjoy!

Oct 15-18th

Join the Protest against MIPIM – the world's largest property fair taking place in London this year.

Stop the selling off of our land and our homes. We demand decent, affordable and accessible housing for all! We are supporting the protest whilst positively proposing solutions to the housing crisis. More details will be sent by email & on the website.

Other useful information and resources

Education and Training: We organised a packed out one day course on Handling Performance Management after hearing how it was being used against members to undermine and divide them rather than support and aid their development. We have collected some useful material, so let us know if you need any. In addition the postal workers union, CWU, had developed a useful guide and Unite is considering developing something more specific to the sector which could prove useful.

Equalities: Young members: We're aware that though we are seeing younger members join the branch, fewer are yet to be as involved as we'd like. We have therefore set up a survey to get information about workplace issues for younger members. We've had some interesting replies but would appreciate more and we will re-open the survey in the coming weeks. More on the web <http://bit.ly/YMembs>

International Solidarity: This union and branch encourages direct links with workers across the world. What happens in one community often effects or is linked to another. We have supported the Campaign Kazakhstan to end the dictatorship, and more recently affiliated to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and actively taken part in the protests for peace. <http://www.palestinecampaign.org/>

Our Voice in Unite the Union: Unite policy conference also took place in June and with over 600 members of the union proposing and debating policy, including housing. It supported our call for capping rents not benefits, axing the bedroom tax and building more secure council homes. It was also re-iterated that we should oppose all cuts and co-ordinate industrial action <http://bit.ly/UnitePC2014>

Did you know? Our branch has within it 148 housing and social care organisations? Overall we have a growing layer of active reps; who organise meetings, listen to members and represent them individually and collectively on issues like pay, bullying, and disciplinarys. If you'd like to become a rep or get more involved in your workplace or on branch campaigns, get in touch.

If you recruit someone to unite, you could get up to £25 voucher per joiner. The offer is available when the person you are recruiting joins online and enters your surname and Unite membership number when asked.

Contact Us

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The rest of the Branch committee are: Bryan Kennedy, Catherine McDonagh, Adam Lambert, Kingsley Abrams, Cheryl McLeod, David Oladele, Vanessa Doidge, Candy Maria Terra, Kieran Duffy, Emma Robinson, Jenny Mair, Veronica Restrepofisk and Kerry Feetham.

Our Regional Officer is **Nicky Marcus** (nicky.marcus@unitetheunion.org) covering most organisations except Look Ahead and Equinox, which are now covered by **Peter Storey**. **Gina Osborne** assists Nicky and Peter, particularly with updates to membership records (gina.osborne@unitetheunion.org).



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