



# Annual Report

March 2015

### Introduction

This report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015.

As our Annual Report shows, we can celebrate another highly successful year thanks to the hard work of reps, activists and members. We have won some significant gains for our members, and have grown both in size and strength.

The Branch Committee wishes to thank all those who have contributed to our work over the year, whether in the high profile battles that we have fought and won, or in the smaller scale but no less vital daily tasks of union work. Each contribution has helped create a collective force that is so much greater than the sum of its parts and places us in the best possible position for the challenges of the coming year.

Suzanne Muna  
**Branch Secretary**

### Strike One: One Housing Group



The first of our major strike actions took place at **One Housing Group** (OHG). This followed the shameful victimisation,

suspension and then sacking of our lead convenor, Bryan Kennedy earlier in the year.

Despite reports by OHG that its surplus had tripled over three years, reaching £35.8 million in 2013, and the OHG chief executive, Mick Sweeney's salary uplift of £31,000, the group nonetheless sought to cut the pay of frontline workers earning between £20k and £30k, citing 'market forces'. Bryan had led and won a major strike which had prevented the implementation of these

cuts. In an act of calculated vengeance, OHG sacked Bryan the day before they were due to meet with him and other reps to discuss pay. The branch worked with members to launch the 'I'm Bryan' campaign and took sustained strike action in defence of Bryan, demonstrating that the victimisation of reps will not be tolerated. The case is now at court.



The branch thanks all those who supported Bryan and the broader campaign.

### Strike Two: St MungosBroadway

2014 marked the largest strike action ever undertaken by the Branch when our members at St MungosBroadway (SMB) took seven days of industrial action in defence of jobs and services.



The strike was triggered when St Mungos merged with Broadway Housing, a much smaller association, with the replacement of the St Mungos chief executive and many senior staff. The new CEO and Director of HR, formerly of Broadway, sought to further the differential rates of pay and terms and conditions by starting new staff on lower salaries. They also tried to undermine union organising and facilities. Members recognised this as the thin end of the wedge for the delivery of quality services and the retention of decent staff. As one member explained:

*“the bottom line for all of us is the effect that a reduction in staff quality over time will have on our vulnerable clients.”*

SMB members showed an exemplary level of determination, commitment and organisation. The strike gained a national profile, and was raised in Parliament by Islington MP, Jeremy Corbyn.

Members used every possible means to apply pressure on the SMB management. Solid, sustained strike action was backed by leverage tactics and political pressure, the latter applied with two daily protests outside commissioning councils almost every strike day, and with letters to MPs and councillors. It was a strategy that proved highly effective and on the eve of a second strike block of ten days, management capitulated, conceding to the demands of members, including the transfer of Broadway staff onto St Mungos contracts.



Unite membership at SMB doubled during the period of the dispute, and members remain determined to ensure that SMB does not engage in the race to the bottom, but continues to win contracts by competing on providing quality, not cutting salaries.

Unite SMB members and the branch would like to thank the hundreds of people across the labour movement who supported this strike action with donations and messages of support.

### **Look Out Look Ahead!**

A further inspiring victory was won in July at Look Ahead's (LA) vital mental health services. Staff at LA were already on low pay, having received an average pay cut of 15% just two years previously. LA acted true to its reputation of being one of the worst 'race to the bottom' offenders when it sought to impose a further 14% pay cut on these staff, and delete skilled posts in a service already stretched to the limits. There was no financial necessity for these cuts, as the most recently available accounts for Look Ahead showed 12% growth, reserves of £61 million, and a £60k pay rise for their highest paid executive.



Despite not having union recognition, Unite members successfully balloted for strike action at four Hackney projects, and won overwhelming support for the

strike both internally and across the wider branch. On the eve of the first day of action, Look Ahead climbed down and backed away from its planned pay cuts. They also agreed to recognise Unite.

Not surprisingly, our membership at Look Ahead has continued to grow and will continue to guard against deterioration of terms and conditions for those delivering vital services to vulnerable clients.

### **And a Third Victory!**



We entered 2014/15 with another dispute in hand at the HCA, when management attempted a pay allocation which represented a

considerable disadvantage to some. Members stood united, having taken

their first strike action at the Agency in the March. Later that year, the dispute was won with a new offer consolidating pay increases for the vast majority of staff and further strike action was called off.

### Fighting for Sector Standards

The Sector Standards campaign is a key driver for much of the branch's strategic work. It aims to deliver collective bargaining between Unite and all responsible housing associations, with agreement on sector-wide rates of pay, pensions, training, staffing, and other employment issues.

This work took a step forward toward the end of last year when Unite nationally began to approach commissioners who could play a vital role in ending the deterioration in terms and conditions which too often accompanies retendering of contracts. We have also established a wealth of resources and bargaining materials for reps, all of which can be accessed through the Campaigns section of the branch website. Our next stage is an interactive website enabling members to 'Score Your Employer' so that we can identify and target the worst offenders.

### Housing Worker Pensions

Throughout the year we have continued to campaign for decent pension provision for housing workers. The value of, and access to, the specialist housing pension (SHPS) in particular has been steadily eroded over the last few years as it has been revalued, and the branch has worked with our national and other unite officers on issuing briefings for reps and members both to understand the implications of proposed changes, and to campaign for decent pension provision for all.

This remains a key demand of our Sector Standards campaign. For briefing materials and regular

updates, please visit the Housing Workers website.

### Manifesto for Housing



2015 is election year so we wrote a Housing Manifesto. Among others, the Manifesto calls for a greater investment in council housing, rent controls, and an end to the commercialisation

of housing associations. It also contains advice on how to approach electoral candidates with the Manifesto to press the case for housing. With many thanks to our Chair Paul Kershaw for coordinating this work, and for contributing to Unite's work nationally on the demands we need to place on politicians if we are to reverse the housing crisis.

### Campaigning and Community

This year we have extended our reach beyond the workplace and into both the wider labour movement and community housing campaigns. The SMB strikers led the TUC's Britain Needs a Pay Rise demonstration, we participated in the May Day 2014 march, and co-organised the highly successful March for Homes in January this year.



Such campaigning has been helpful in uniting our members with those fighting for a common

cause of greater social justice and equality. This work will continue to be an important means of raising housing issues more broadly.

### Building Our Branch

Our branch of 2,500 members and over 100 representatives covers 170

different employers ranging from very small micro-employers to very large housing associations.

The victories secured over the last year have positioned Unite as the leading union force protecting the pay, terms and conditions of workers in this sector, as well inspiring other groups of members to get organised. Toward the end of the year, we have newly elected representatives in **Centrepont, Metropolitan Housing Trust** and **Family Mosaic**, and look forward to developing active union engagement in these workplaces.

### Branch Meetings

We have continued to hold monthly branch meetings on the second Tuesday of each month throughout the year, with the exception of December and August when these are replaced with social events.



The meetings begin with an informal half-hour of welcome and light refreshments, helping to set a friendly tone for the subsequent branch business. They are open to all members, not just reps, and the branch can assist with travel and carer costs.

A major part of the branch meetings is taken up with reports from workplaces leading to discussions on what strategies might work best, and helping members and reps identify solutions to workplace problems. These have involved pay claims, capability processes, bullying, health and safety issues. We also use the branch to build support and solidarity across the trade union movement, and a list of donations and affiliations is provided at the end of the report.

Alongside these, the Branch Committee meets at least once per month to ensure that actions agreed at the Branch are carried through. These meetings are the mainstay of branch organising and our thanks go to Assistant Branch Secretary, Arti Dillon, for organising the meetings and providing secretarial support.

### Communications

The work begun last year on redesigning our website with Sue Singer of Singernet was completed this year, giving us a fully functioning and vital 'shop window' for our work.



It now contains campaigning and workplace pages, a gallery, details of branch meetings and other events, access to constitutional documents and regularly updated branch news and events pages.

Our Facebook page has 200 'likes' and is open to members and others to share information. The Twitter account (@unitehousing) is growing rapidly, with over 1,200 followers. We also use text alerts for key activities and events. We have email addresses for around 1,700 members and they now receive an update at least once per month on branch activity. Finally, we have set up our own mini call centres (with thanks to the Unite Organising Department) to allow us to call members from specific workplaces and help mobilise and engage them in new organising.

Social media, text and email messages have allowed us to keep members up to date as events develop, and were essential for communicating during our disputes. We would encourage all members to access the website and social media regularly, and ensure that we have up to date email and mobile numbers for you. Please provide updates to [unite.le1111@gmail.com](mailto:unite.le1111@gmail.com).

### Education and Training

Union courses are advertised on our website and reps are regularly encouraged to attend training events. We also organised our own in-branch training during the year, led by branch reps but with help from a Unite facilitator covering the use of Capability Procedures by employers as a method of disciplining staff. It was a very well attended event and generated ideas for future developments on the issues, as well as providing reps with practical strategies to fight such disciplinaries.

### Reps Handbook – A Great Resource - Now Online!



Being a rep is a rewarding role. It is about achieving positive change in the workplace. But isolated reps can lack access to support networks and we therefore helped develop a Reps Handbook

which provides a wealth of easily accessible information. It can be downloaded from the website, or email [suz.muna.unite@gmail.com](mailto:suz.muna.unite@gmail.com) if you would like a copy.

### Casework and Staffing

Changes to HMRC rules have meant that Unite has had to alter the way it uses lay representatives who are paid for by Unite but go into workplaces where there is no elected union rep to support members with individual casework. We would like to thank all those who undertook casework for us in the early part of the year.

In September, the Branch appointed Phil Rose as a Casework Officer to undertake individual support for members on a temporary basis, and we thank Phil for providing a crucial

service during this period. Staffing for the Branch over the longer term is now under consideration with a staffing paper to be presented to members for a decision at the AGM.

### Democratic Participation

Engagement in the democratic structures of the union is vital for furthering the interests of our members and influencing the allocation of union resources.

We presented motions and sent delegates to the 2014 Unite Policy Conference, Regional and National Industrial Sector Committees, and Area Activist Committee. We are also represented on the Public Sector Combine which aims to coordinate action across a range of public service providers. All our Branch resolutions are available on our website.

In 2015 we are preparing to engage in the Rules Conference which will be significant for defining the relationship between the union and the Labour Party, as well as determining how the union operates.

### In Conclusion

The success of the branch relies on many hours of time and an unquantifiable energy and dedication by branch offices, reps, activists and lay members. Yet with even greater austerity looming, our work has never been more essential. We would strongly urge all members to get actively involved in the work that we do, not least because we have shown time and again that where we fight, we win. Whatever your skills, we will be able to make use of them, and we will continue to build on this approach in 2015.

Suzanne Muna

**Unite Housing Workers Branch  
Secretary**



**Our Thanks** go to everyone who got involved in the last twelve months in whatever capacity. Our special thanks also to the union officers who have been so crucial to the effective functioning of the branch, and so inspiring to work with. These include Regional Officers **Nicky Marcus, Adam Lambert, Peter Storey, and Alan Scott**. The Branch has also received vital support from **Peter Kavanagh**, Regional Secretary, and has worked closely and actively with **Sally Kosky**, our

National Officer. Finally, Unite officers **Gina Osborne, Maureen German, Kerry Jenkins** and **James Lazou** have also made valuable and irreplaceable contributions to our work.

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**Thanks to Branch Officers** our **Chair** Paul Kershaw, **Treasurer** Kerry Feetham, **Secretary** Suzanne Muna, **Vice Chair** David Oladele, **Assistant Branch Secretary** Arti Dillon, **Campaigns Officer** Adam Lambert, **Education & Training Officer** Cheryl McLeod, **Health & Safety Officers** Vanessa Doidge and Jenny Mair, **Equalities Officers** Kingsley Abrahms and Candy Maria Terra, **Communications Officer** Catherine McDonagh, **Youth Officer** Keiran Duffy, and **Centrepoint Workplace Seat** Veronica Restrepo-Fisk. With thanks also to Jon Hughes, Glyn Robbins, and Michael Isaac who provided **additional workplace representation**.

**Facebook** [www.facebook.com/groups/181528368580712/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/181528368580712/) **Website** [www.housingworkers.org.uk](http://www.housingworkers.org.uk)

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## Resolutions

- MIPIM (protesting against global property trade show)
- Labour and Austerity (condemning Labour's austerity commitments)
- Kobane (solidarity with Kurdish resistance to ISIS)
- Minimum Wage (calling for £10 per hour NMW now)
- Stop Aylesbury Demolitions Now (supporting the protests)
- Offering Unite a Political Choice (rule change for rules conference)
- Democratisation of Political Committees (rule change for rules conference via RISC)
- Cycle of Elections (rule change for rules conference via AAC)
- March for Homes (actively building for the event on 31<sup>st</sup> January)
- Palestine Solidarity Campaign (protesting against the occupation)
- Hungry for Justice: Fast Food Rights (against zero hours contracts)

## Affiliations and Donations

Tamil Solidarity Campaign \* Fast Food Rights Campaign \* Hackney Peoples Assembly \* London Labour Film Festival \* London Mayday \* Southwark Group of Tenants (SGTO) \* Southwark Benefit Justice \* Construction workers Blacklist Support Group \* Lambeth College workers strike fund \* Care UK workers strike fund \* Unite Greenwich parking attendants strike fund \* RMT strike fund \* PCS strike fund \* Barbour workers strike fund

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