

Housing Workers

Newsletter



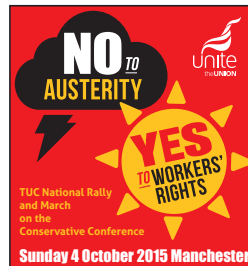
Autumn Newsletter 2015 – Unite Housing Workers LE 1111

Dear members

Welcome to our Autumn 2015 newsletter, written while the Labour leadership contest is in full swing – and with a strong manifesto calling for, among other things, a greater investment in social and affordable housing, imposition of rent caps, and greater protection of worker rights. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party leadership challenge has inevitably attracted support from a huge section of workers. Our branch has consistently argued for our paid political representatives to echo the demands and needs of Unite's formal policy, democratically established by members. These include supporting decent pay and pensions, a fully funded NHS, and welfare instead of cuts and privatisation. Corbyn is one of the few who comes close to aligning with these demands and we have for this reason fully endorsed his campaign.

This Autumn's newsletter will reflect on some of the key issues for us including the **Trade Union Bill** which could further shackle us in our campaigns and how we fight it. We also cover the **privatisation of housing** that is expanding rapidly in the Housing Association sector, leaving little actually affordable housing stock whilst we see rents rocket and evictions rise. We'll have some short reports from some of the workplaces but much more detail is on the website and on local workplace newsletters.

Resources: As members voted 79% in favour of a levy to fund a part-time organiser we organised a rigorous recruitment process and now have an organiser for 3 days a week. The Organiser will help strengthen the union within existing workplaces working with elected representatives, and will develop union organisation at new workplaces to further build the branch. Much of this work will focus on developing largely self-sufficient activists schooled in the organising and mobilising approach and will be planned with the branch committee.



Social housing is worth fighting for!

There are some powerful, sometimes contradictory, and often unpredictable forces at play in the social housing sector. However, it is clear that they will combine to increase Housing Association commercialisation, leading some major providers to consider exiting the social housing market altogether. HAs increasingly ditch their founding, socially beneficial commitment to provide housing affordable to those on average workers' wages, in favour of a business ethos that holds the creation of vast surpluses above all else. This trend has played out in the actions of Peabody against its subsidiary, CBHA, One Housing Group against tenants in the Isle of Dogs, and Genesis, Hyde and Astor in considering exiting social housing (all reported elsewhere in the newsletter, or on our website).

This trend is fuelled by measures announced by the new Conservative government. New Right to Buy (RtB) laws will give some 1.3m HA tenants the option of buying their properties at discounts of up to £103k in London and £77k elsewhere. Clearly this would diminish HA assets. One implication, as with council housing RtB, is that this policy is in danger of being "Right to Buy to Let" and a significant proportion of properties sold under RtB could end up on the private rental market. The 1% rent cuts for both HA and LA housing may be even more significant, and potentially means a 12% reduction in HA rental income by 2021. Rent cuts are clearly beneficial to tenants, but gains could be rapidly eliminated by another new policy, dubbed 'pay to stay', which will compel providers to charge households earning £40k in London and £30k elsewhere to pay anything up to market rent. Tenants with incomes lower than these amounts are anyway unlikely to be able to save enough for deposits.

No doubt employers will attempt to use these trends to argue that decent pay and pensions, proper staffing levels, and other worker benefits are no longer affordable. However, for some considerable time HAs have achieved record annual surpluses; and 2015 was no exception with a record combined sector surplus of £2.4bn. One consistent feature has been that these surpluses fail to 'trickle down' to benefit housing workers. In the face of rising costs and reduced in-work benefits, member demands for improved pay and conditions are therefore more valid than ever.

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Did you know if you work full time you should have 28 days holiday (5.6 weeks pro rata if part time). Over 1.7 million workers are NOT taking their entitlement.

Peabody

Brrr! It's not just the imposition of a flimsy pay offer that has caused a chill at one of Peabody's largest offices, but faulty air conditioning leaving people way too cold or way too hot! Union reps surveyed staff and the large and angry response enabled them to approach the employer, demanding change. Thanks to Unite's intervention, Peabody staff at the Walworth office should be feeling more comfortable!

PayUp! In response to the meagre pay offer, reps, branch committee members, and the Regional Officer leafleted the annual staff conference as members demanding that Peabody pay up. Peabody CEO Steve Howlett had benefited from the seventh highest increase for an association boss in England (at 9.98%), and the fifth biggest bonus at £26k. Not surprisingly, inside the conference hall, the Peabody executive weren't feeling the love. Indeed, one staff member, to much applause, argued eloquently for decent pay, concluding with an appeal to the rest of the staff to channel their anger by joining the union and get involved. The pay campaign continues.

One of the long-standing Peabody reps is now leaving Peabody to move onto new pastures. The branch committee would like to thank her for all her hard work over the years, and wish her all the best for the future. She has recruited several new reps to keep up the good work after she leaves. These can be contacted via peabodyunite@gmail.com. The next members' meeting is at 12.30 on the 9th September upstairs at the Albert Arms.

Peabody Sacks Board of CBHA!

In April 1862, George Peabody established the Peabody Donation Fund (now the Peabody Trust) with the aim of providing decent quality, affordable housing for the "artisans and labouring poor of London". The Trust developed its first estate in London in 1864. It is hard to detect any of this worthy sense of purpose among the current cohort of Peabody board or executive members. In particular, the board of the giant Peabody Group recently sacked the resident board members of its subsidiary, CBHA (Community Based Housing Trust). The resident board members formed the majority of the CBHA board, and were dismissed for failing to agree to dismantle their structure, abandoning control to the parent board.

Resident leaders say the CBHA model gives superior service delivery, and has allowed the association to become a well-governed and financially healthy organisation; a statement borne out by CBHA performance indicators. The plans would place these excellent standards of service delivery at risk. In place of a resident board, Peabody intends to offer CBHA representatives much weaker 'advisory' status, with Peabody making the Orwellian claim that this will offer greater influence over the subsidiary's future. The branch has been offering support to Unite members at CBHA, and to the wider resident campaign.



One Housing Group (OHG)

In negotiations with Unite, OHG members received a £1,5000 payment, which seems reasonable at face value, but in place of a consolidated pay rise does not represent good value. It fails to compensate staff for the rising cost of living, and with an operational surplus of £40m in 2014, OHG could afford much more. The union is calling on all OHG staff to join Unite and work with us to get the pay increase they deserve. The OHG union rep is also busy carrying out a survey on tenancy sign-ups and would like to hear from members if they are being asked to do this additional work.

Centrepont

Unite members at Centrepont are celebrating a successful pay negotiation giving members an above-inflation increase after they rejected an original management offer. Centrepont, despite publishing a very healthy surplus in their 2013/1, offered just 1.5% to members. Unite members rejected the offer, considering it inadequate recognition of the contribution they made to Centrepont's success, and leading management to raise their offer. Members have accepted the revised award. Elected reps Veronica and Alasdair said: "Without a union presence at Centrepont this pay rise would not have been possible."

Management would have offered 1.5% and staff would have had to accept because without the union, staff would have no opportunity to negotiate. With more members this time next year, we hope to achieve another decent pay rise for the hard working staff that make this organisation what it is. Join Unite and turn that hope into reality".

Look Ahead

Look Ahead Unite members were recently engaged in two separate disputes with the company. The first related to three services recently TUPEd into Look Ahead in Brent, where terms and conditions immediately came under attack. Meanwhile, members from the mental health services in Hackney were locked in a pay dispute after a dismal 1% pay offer. Separate ballots returned 100% in favour of strike action, and the decisive result led management to offer several concessions. In Brent TUPEd staff kept their original contracts, and retained the Unite recognition agreement which had been in jeopardy. In Hackney, all staff had their sleep-in payments reinstated and backdated, with on-going negotiations to upwardly harmonise all Assistant Support Workers to Support Worker status, removing the two-tier staffing model, and gaining a pay increase in excess of 10% for the lowest paid workers. The repeated victories of Unite within Look Ahead shows what can be achieved with strong collective action, and reps have called upon all members to recruit non-unionised colleagues to consolidate union strength even further. Contact reps through lookaheadunitemembers@hotmail.com

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PENSIONS = Deferred PAY

The Social Housing Pension Scheme (SHPS) has written to employers this week informing them that they will be required to pay just under £32 million in increased contributions from next April. While housing association bosses have been increasing their pension pots and their six figure salaries it is entirely possible that some will respond by attempting to cut their staff's pension.

Unite LE1111 Branch secretary and Unite Executive Council member Suzanne Muna has commented "Inadequate pensions raise the threat of poverty in old age for our members. It is deferred pay that our members contribute to, and a safeguard for their welfare after many years of dedicated service to service users and employers. A further attack on pensions would be unacceptable. We urge employers to step back from making further attacks on staff pay and conditions which can only lead to damaging disputes".

Unite has recently supported a number of campaigns to defend decent pensions in the private sector. We seek to extend pension coverage, and if employers propose cuts in benefits or increased contributions, Unite members should be consulted about what action they may want to take including the possibility of industrial action. Contact your Unite rep, Unite officer Adam Lambert, or the branch Chair Paul Kershaw if any changes are proposed or come to light.

The Trade Union Bill

Inequality and job insecurity are increasing. Zero hours contracts and lack of investment in skills remain key problems for workers, and we receive frequent reports of increasing workload and workplace stress. For government, the answer is not to tackle the difficulties workers face, but to weaken the rights of people trying to put them right. The proposals set out in the Trade Union Bill are so undermining to workers' rights that seventy industrial relations academics were prompted to decry the bill as: "the most sustained attack on trade union and workers' rights since the Combination laws of the early 19th century. In addition to minimum thresholds that seriously curtail the possibility of legitimate strike action, the bill also attacks the ability of unions to represent their members. Facility time for reps is being reduced, and the system of paying subscriptions via payroll ('check-off') is being withdrawn.

The letter describes how trade unions in Britain provide an outstandingly important voice for workers, and a powerful collective forum to protect pay, terms and conditions. The authors also stress that unions provide a unique "countervailing force against the excesses of employer power, and contribute to innovation, skills upgrading, and workplace performance," concluding "Given the fact the UK labour market is already one of the most flexible and least regulated in the global economy, evidence in support of the benefits of the bill is seriously wanting."

One measure requires some workplaces to have 40% of members (whether they vote or not) in favour to be allowed to strike. This is startling hypocrisy from a government elected by 24% of those eligible to vote. They also insist on a postal voting system that is expensive and designed to produce a low turnout. Unions have been calling for electronic voting in elections. The Bill contains proposals that could criminalise peaceful pickets and would police comments on social media. It is a fundamental attack on democratic rights as well as employment rights. But it is not hard to see why the government have prioritised this attack – they see unions as the biggest obstacle to austerity and their programme of enriching the rich. It is therefore vital to "#killthebill". Len McCluskey, Unite General Secretary has said "We won't kill this rotten bill in Westminster", making the point that all union members needed to get involved. The branch has already sent a large delegation to a meeting to plan our fightback, and we would encourage all members to come along to a branch meeting or contact a branch officer if you want to discuss the campaign.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) still has in its armoury the 2012 decision to investigate organising a general strike. Now is the time to use it. That is what many from the branch will be calling for when we join the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) lobby of the TUC's annual congress. Please join us for the trip to Brighton on Sunday 13th September, and help us build our power through this campaign.



Striking against Privatisation at the National Gallery

After 50 days of strike action and winning the London Living wage, PCS workers at the national gallery began indefinite strike action in August. This branch gathered to join them on the picket line for a day in recognition that the fight against low pay and privatisation affects us all, and because a healthy society requires access to affordable cultural pursuits when we do have time off. Privatisation gives us inferior services at inflated prices, and we will continue to support PCS colleagues in their struggle.



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Meetings, Marches & Mania:

Branch meetings have also been scheduled for **Tues 8th Sep, Oct 13th, Nov 10th**. We start with light refreshments at 6pm, formal business 6.30pm-8.30pm. Meetings have been booked at Unite HQ, 128 Theobalds Road, WC2H (Level access). *We email minutes, agenda and confirm venues and dates a week before.*

Our christmas do is likely to be **in the first week of December**. A quiz, dj, the odd rebellious film, the odd free drink and food. What's not to love? If you would like to help organise this, please get in touch. In addition to these your organisation may have meetings to discuss and plan union activity. Keep an eye out for information or let us know if you'd like to develop this locally.

The National Shop Stewards Network will have a fringe meeting at the TUC in Brighton this year as it lobbies for co-ordinated action to challenge the cuts but also significantly the Trade Union Bill. We have 8 train tickets for members, so please get in touch if you'd like to join branch committee members for the event. We'd love to see you!

March on Tory party conference Oct 4th

The TUC has called for National protests at the Tory party conference. More details will be coming soon including travel to Manchester with Unite. Thousands of trade union members and supporters will march through the city to tell this government that we say 'NO to austerity' and 'YES to workers' rights'. Join us.

Housing Conference Saturday Oct 10th

Unite the Union, The Peoples Assembly, Radical Housing Network, Defend Council Housing and others have come together to organise a national conference on building a movement to fighting the housing crisis and develop solutions together. More details soon!

The Haldane Society of Lawyers has organised an international conference called **Women Fighting Back**.

It will take place on Saturday 28th and Sunday 29th November 2015, at London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE10AA. For more information, email secretary@haldane.org



A Hard Days Night! TUC report on night work

A recent update on the growing research evidence showing that nightshifts are damaging to health. It's what has concerned members of the RMT, Unite, ASLEF and TSSA who have been forced into taking strike action against London Underground's proposal to impose night working without recognising health concerns or work/life balance. Some may already be aware of the negative health impacts of night work, which include a heightened risks of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and depression. However, less attention has been given to date on the impacts on home life and relationships. A Hard Day's Night reviews the available research, which shows that night working can increase the risk of relationship problems, can affect the emotional wellbeing of a night worker's children, and is associated with higher childcare costs. But the negative impacts of night working are reduced when workers have more influence and control over their shift patterns. While the impact on work/life balance might sound aspirational, the proposals include allowing the employer to give just 24 hours' notice of a decision to send a worker to any underground station for the day. Just one effect of this is to make arranging childcare or other family commitments almost impossible. Employers must therefore properly consider and address the implications, unions are encouraging reps to do risk assessments as part of the process of consultation. Decisions to extend night working should always involve consultation and negotiation with the union to ensure fair and safe outcomes. Recommendations include:

- Night working is only introduced where necessary.
- No existing workers should be forced to work nights.
- Shift patterns should be negotiated between unions, union members and employers.
- Workers should have some element of control over their rota, so that they can ensure that the shifts they work are best suited to their individual circumstances.
- Workers should always have sufficient notice of their shift patterns so they can make arrangements well in advance.

Not sure how to respond to changes like this where you work? Get in touch with your rep, Regional Officer, or one of the branch officers. The Full TUC report is linked on our website, and you can also find useful material on www.hazards.org.

Contact Us

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

Paul Kershaw, Branch Chair: kershawpaul@hotmail.com – 07980 448641

Arti Dillon, Branch Organiser: Unite.LE1111@gmail.com – **07977 132391**

The rest of the Branch committee are: **Catherine Mcdonagh, Kingsley Abrams, Jon Hughes, Glyn Robbins, David Oladele, Dom Rollin, Veronica Restrepo, Shingirai Nyabango and Kerry Brier**

Our **full time paid** Regional Officer is **Adam Lambert** (Adam.Lambert@unite.theunion.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@unite.theunion.org).



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