



Housing
BRANCH 1111
Workers
JOBS AND HOMES FOR ALL

Annual Report

March 2016



Introduction

This report covers the period from 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016.



Welcome to all our new members!

Over the last twelve months, the housing shortage has escalated into a full blown crisis without end in sight. The Guardian reported for example that the number of tenant evictions through courts in England and Wales reached a record high at almost 43,000 in one year. It has meant that our work to defend housing workers, the services they work in, and the clients they serve, has been more relevant and necessary than ever.

As a result, our activities have stretched well beyond the boundaries of our own workplaces, taking on the defence of social housing and homelessness services, and opposing the stranglehold of austerity. We have organised in more workplaces, taken on more campaigns, and built an even stronger and more active branch. We have also engaged more widely across the union to build alliances with other industrial sectors.

None of this would have been possible without the dedication and time of numerous Unite members and officials over the year. The Branch Committee extends its warmest thanks to everyone involved. With so many good activists on our side, we are able to look forward confidently to another year fighting on behalf of housing workers across the county.

Suzanne Muna
Branch Secretary

Building Workplace Presence

The most crucial aspect of all our activities is developing and supporting our representatives in their workplaces.

We cover almost 3,000 members in over 200 housing and social care employers. Within this, there are thousands of separate workplaces, particularly in the supported housing and social care sector. Unite is recognised for collective bargaining within some but not all of these workplaces, but even where recognition does not exist, members have been able to win noteworthy victories through effective organising and campaigning.

It is of course impossible to review all our workplaces here, but some notable examples are:

In **Peabody**, one of our larger associations, we have recruited new representatives and created a strong presence. The team have successfully challenged proposed changes to contracts.



CBHA a small, community based housing association in Waltham Forest that was previously a

subsidiary of Peabody, but last year merged with the parent. Over the last two years we have unionised the workplace and recruited new reps, who are working with the growing Peabody reps team to protect members during transfer.

Members at one of our most established workplaces – **Circle** – and at one of our newest – **Catalyst** – have been engaged in fighting detrimental restructuring proposals. Both are extremely wealthy employers, and as we have highlighted, management's financial justification for joining the race to the bottom is just not credible.



St Mungos (previously St Mungos Broadway), remains our largest density of membership

at around 70%, and workplace organising has continued to thrive. The reps recruited a considerable number of new members after a high profile and successful battle against a downward harmonisation of pay, terms and conditions, resorting to industrial action in 2014/15.

Members have built on this victory by negotiating automatic upward harmonisation of all terms including salary for staff who are transferred into the organisation - unique in our sector. The union has won paid breaks for staff who work in front line services which were previously unpaid. The reps have also defended members against attempts by management to undermine collective agreements around the introduction of low paid staff within existing teams and is in the process of challenging a decision that affects the annual leave of shift workers.



With strengthened reps groups at **Family Mosaic, Metropolitan Housing Group** and **Peter Bedford HA,**

we have begun planning new campaigns over pay and the other work related concerns of members.

During the year **Equinox** joined with a Social Interest Group, providing the organisation with greater stability. We have recruited new representatives and extended our membership into other sections of the organisation. We now have a more positive working relationship with the new management and recently gained

member initiated changes to restructuring plans.

Both **Centrepont** and **One Housing Group** have extremely hostile management, generating an exceptionally high level of grievances, disciplinaries and performance measures. The latter processes are frequently used to force out and intimidate staff. Nonetheless, reps at each organisation are doing a sterling job in protecting and representing members whilst building the union presence.

Look Ahead has become more settled after significant unionisation and a major victory in 2014 to protect newly transferred staff from threats to pay, terms and conditions. Unite gained union recognition at the Hackney projects and has successfully built outwards from this core to other workplaces too.

Sanctuary Housing Group is our newest success story, with a blossoming union organisation triggered by restructuring proposals. New reps have been recruited and a wide section of the membership have actively engaged to ensure that they suffer no detriment through any organisational reshaping.

Although we organise mainly within housing associations, we also have a strong presence and collective bargaining rights in national bodies such as **The National Housing Federation, Housing Ombudsman,** and **The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA).**



Our membership at the HCA has increased recently through the high profile HCA Pay Up! Campaign, and by strong challenges to bullying and harassment and poor management.

The forthcoming Housing and Planning Bill and the growing housing crisis will put new pressures on our reps over the next twelve months. Workplace-centred unionisation and mobilisation is therefore set to remain at the forefront of our activity for the foreseeable future.

Merger Activity

We are receiving reports of increasing interest in mergers. Affinity Sutton and Circle are set to create a new super-association owning 127,000 properties and covering nearly 500,000 tenants. A further planned merger between Genesis and Thames Valley will move the new group into the top ten largest housing associations in England. This activity will bring opportunities for the Branch to recruit new members and build the union's presence in the sector.

Low Pay



This issue of low pay remains the biggest concern for our members, yet as housing associations report another record year of surpluses, combining at £3bn, it is clearly not necessary.

Some of this increasing wealth has evidently found its way into the pockets of chief executives. Inside Housing reported that "*chief executives of the biggest 100 housing*



associations in the sector were paid an average of £182,780 this year, a 5.5% rise on last year ...".

At the same time, The Guardian highlighted increasing housing association pay differentials.

The executive of Anchor, for example, earned more than 23 times that of the lowest paid full-time employee. Others with significant pay gaps included Sanctuary, New Charter, Metropolitan, Hyde Group, Circle Housing, Gentoo, Hanover, Family Mosaic and Radian. In some cases, sections of staff were employed on the minimum wage.

Our Branch continues to engage in pay battles in many of these workplaces, coordinating across employers to ensure that action is synchronised for maximum impact. Initiatives include pay surveys and the branded Pay Up! campaign. We have produced dedicated materials such as a new 'Pay Up!' pop-up banner, and tailored leaflets, all available on request from the branch.

The National Housing Forum

This group has taken off in 2015/16, having begun as an initiative of this branch a couple of years ago. It has continued working with our National Officer, Sally Kosky, to strengthen collaboration between Unite's housing branches, which include Home Group,

Riverside, and Your Housing. Our aim now is to extend it to include housing workers in local



authorities, and build deeper links with Unite Community with whom we've found common cause on many housing-related issues.

The members of the Forum established a new website and an interactive 'Rate Your Employer' survey, the latter helping us target the worst of our sector's employers. And we were able to offer support to the inspiring Unite members at Thirteen Group when they successfully took strike action in December over pay and to oppose detrimental contract changes.



The Forum also used its national perspective to develop the Sector Standards initiative through which we aim to win national collective bargaining and challenge insecurity for workers, particularly those in the social care and homelessness sub-sectors.

The Forum is chaired by our Branch Chair, Paul Kershaw, and is open to all Unite housing workers, so please contact the branch if you are interested in participating.

The Housing Crisis

As the housing crisis has grown, our work to fight for housing justice has been undertaken through two main projects.



Community Campaigning

We have helped plan and mobilise for local housing demos, working

closely with groups such as the Radical Housing Network, Defend Council Housing, Architects for Social Housing, and Unite Community (a membership section for those not in work). We supported and spoke at housing rallies in London and Cambridge, joined a protest against the RIBA's Stirling Prize nomination for a social cleansing project, and protested outside the annual MIPIM property trade fair in October.

The largest campaign of this year is likely to be **Kill the Housing and Planning Bill**. The next activity is a national demo planned for **Sunday 13th March 2016**. It is led by a coalition of housing groups, activists and trade unionists, and all our members are encouraged to engage to participate. Details are sent out regularly to reps and to the wider membership, and we post frequent

updates through our website, Facebook, and Twitter.

The escalation of housing as a concern for working people has meant that key activists from our branch are in regular demand as speakers. This included our Branch Chair, Paul Kershaw, who spoke on the threat to social housing at a lobby inside Parliament in January, alongside Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell. Paul will also be speaking at the West London Housing Conference called for later in March by Unite community.



Alongside this outward-facing engagement, our branch was instrumental in bringing

together the industrial, political, and community sections of Unite nationally to discuss launching a visionary **National Housing Campaign**. This campaign recognises that housing has become problematic for all groups of workers and those out of work, and that a large-scale, coordinated response is needed. Through our pay survey, our own members have reported that housing costs are squeezing them to breaking point, forcing them into growing debt and making their futures insecure. It is essential that the Branch does all it can to fight this national scandal.

Building Our Branch

Our branch organising resources were given a considerable boost this year after we recruited a dedicated, part-time Branch Organiser, Arti Dillon funded through a small additional levy on the branch membership fee. The Organiser is managed by the Branch Committee and works closely with our Regional Officer Adam Lambert. Her main area of focus is empowering reps in the fight for improved pay, terms and conditions. She also works on helping build campaigns for decent social housing,

promoting zero tolerance for the race to the bottom in social care and housing, progressing our Sector Standards initiative, and fighting for trade union rights, particularly in opposition to the Trade Union Bill.

We have held 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 occasionally have speakers on topical issues, and in 2015/16, included the role of Trade Union Momentum, and running health and safety campaigns.

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.

Alongside these open meetings, Branch Committee members also work individually with reps in several of our developing workplaces to foster stronger communications and provide support where needed.



The branch helped keep members up to date and well-informed through newsletters in the Spring and Autumn of 2015, and through regular monthly reps' bulletins. We have also

supported reps with leafleting teams, regular call-banking to mobilise for events and activities, *ad-hoc* mailings, the provision of specialist promotional and campaigning materials, and specialist training. In January we also organised another lively and well attended interactive Reps Forum on fighting successful campaigns.

This investment has begun to pay off, enhancing the levels of confidence, skill and organisational planning among workplace representatives. The result has been more frequent workplace meetings, increased campaigning activity, more wins for our members, including on pay, and increased membership engagement in housing campaigns.

Democratic Participation

The democratic structures of our union are vital for ensuring that the wishes and needs of members are fully reflected, and shape the way the union operates.

Through the monthly branch meetings, we have passed resolutions on Trident, ending Social Cleansing, encouraging local authorities to set legal no cuts budgets, opposing the Housing and Planning Bill and the Trade Union Bill, supporting Corbyn and Momentum, expressing solidarity with the PCS National Gallery strikers and the victims of bombing in Turkey, raising awareness on climate change, promoting the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers' Women Fighting Back event, and calling for a trade union candidate for London mayor.



Our resolutions are generally intended to do more than just express opinion, aiming to also galvanise our activity. One such example was the **Campaign Opposing Police Surveillance** to which the Branch affiliated last year and which has attracted much media interest in early 2016. The group has exposed the fact that many people were targeted just for being trade unionists or participating in other social justice campaigns. We therefore jointly sponsored a packed out, lively, and often very moving public debate in

January on the human cost of unscrupulous undercover policing.

We have also helped shape the union's strategies and structures through the election of branch representatives to the Regional and National Industrial Sector Committees, and by sending delegates to the Unite National Rules Conference in July, and the Sector Conference in November.

Our Branch Secretary, Suzanne Muna was elected to Unite's National Executive Council in early 2015 as one of four London and Eastern Territorial reps. She has served her first year highlighting the concerns for members across the region, and arguing for the strategies and solutions our members believe will build on our union's successes.

All resolutions are available on our website. Some go on to regional and national committees, and the national executive. Progress on motions and updates from delegates to the various committees, are reported at our monthly Branch meetings. We would urge members to come along as often as possible to report from your own workplaces and participate in developing branch strategy.

The Trade Union Bill



In 2016, the Tory government in Britain seeks to use the measures

outlined in the **Trade Union Bill** to restrict, constrain and undermine our right to fight against injustice. Government's own figures show that in unionised workplaces, pay is higher and there are fewer health and safety incidents. This is clearly not welcomed by employers aiming for ever greater exploitation of workers.

The measures in this Bill therefore seek to aid employers and prevent us

from campaigning against social injustice, including opposing the detrimental effects of government policies on welfare, housing and access to the legal system.

Unite therefore took a historic step in rewriting the rule book in 2015 to remove the requirement for industrial action to be lawful, recognising that if the law is drawn too tightly, it may be necessary to break it.



This Branch will continue to fight the Trade Union Bill, even if it becomes law, and will not rest from pursuing justice in the workplace and beyond.

Our International Work

We recognise that our fight for workers' rights in Britain and a fairer distribution of economic resources is mirrored across the world, and that international solidarity is an important way to unify our battles. This has been the case especially in 2015 as anti-migrant propaganda hit the press. Our Chair Paul Kershaw therefore offered support to refugees at a meeting in Hammersmith and Fulham in the Autumn.



We also worked with groups such as the Turkish and Kurdish Day Mer group, and have affiliated to the Palastine Solidarity Campaign, Justice for Columbia, and Campaign Kazakhstan.

In Conclusion

Whatever your skills and experience, there is space for you to get involved in our branch. It is the involvement of members that makes us strong and dynamic, and which has gained us wide recognition for our successful activism.



Time and again we have shown that where we fight, we can win. And with the involvement of branch members, this is the approach we propose to take as we grow in 2016.

Our thanks to everyone who has been involved over 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 **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**, and **James Lazou** have also made valuable contributions to our work.

Thanks to Branch Officers our **Chair** Paul Kershaw, **Treasurer** Kerry Brier, **Secretary** Suzanne Muna, **Vice Chair** David Oladele, **Assistant Branch Secretary** Arti Dillon (for part of the year), **Community Campaigns Officers** Glyn Robbins and Martin Calderwood, **Youth Officer** Shingirai Nyabango, **Equalities Officer** Kingsley Abrams, **Communications Officer** Catherine McDonagh, **Health and Safety Officer and Look Ahead Workplace Seat** Dominic Rollin, also **Workplace Seats** Veronica Restrepo-Fisk (**Centrepoint**), Michael Isaac (**One Housing Group**), and Jon Hughes (**St Mungos Broadway**)

Facebook www.facebook.com/groups/181528368580712/ **Website** www.housingworkers.org.uk

Press Sources:

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