

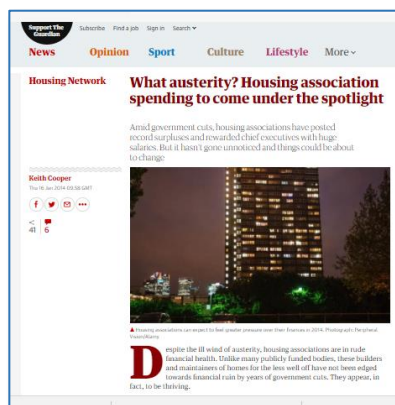
Unite Housing Workers Branch (LE1111)

Annual Report

2017/18

Introduction

It should have been a good news story: the growing financial health of Housing Associations (HAs) over the last year should have been good news for workers and those in housing need. But instead, workers have been squeezed and growth has been in homes built for market rent and sale.



Despite the wealth of their employers, and the high levels of pay awarded to executives, pay rises for the majority of association workers have not kept up with inflation or the spiralling cost of energy, housing and travel. We've heard of crushing workloads while sick pay is pared to the statutory minimum. We've heard that our members are drowning in a tide of disciplinary and performance management measures, while their executives organise perpetual and pointless restructures.

Nor is there any cause to celebrate for those in housing need. The homes that are being developed cost more than an average worker can afford, let alone those without paid employment, or sleeping rough on our streets. At the same time, many associations have withdrawn from the provision of homelessness and housing support services as council budgets are slashed. The opportunity to shore up these vital services through subsidies from their own vast wealth has been a commitment too far for many providers; a

clear sign of the gulf which now lies between housing associations and their charitable origins.

But the Unite Housing Workers Branch has been equally unrelenting in the battle against both trends. We have won some significant victories for our members on pay, pensions, unfair sickness policies, bullying, oppressive management, and inequality. We have strengthened our foothold within several associations. We have joined high profile campaigns against the Housing Act, developed the Housing Association Workers and Residents Network, and consolidated our links with numerous campaign groups. We have fought alongside those opposing regeneration, HA mergers, the crisis in housing, and for the rights of Grenfell survivors. And we will continue to devote energy and resources to these struggles in the year ahead.

Our achievements have only been possible thanks to the determination and courage of our members. The Branch Committee extends its thanks to all those who have helped make our last year such a success.

We move into 2018/19 with a branch that is larger, stronger and better organised because hundreds of housing workers have organised and fought. We greet the new year in a good position to secure further victories for all our members, develop our branch, and campaign alongside those with a passion for housing.

Suzanne Muna
Branch Secretary

Justice in the Workplace

In 2017, our Branch launched our first national pay campaign - '4 for All' - with a claim of 4%. It does appear that in organised workplaces such as Peter Bedford, the campaign has helped win higher awards than last year.

Our reps at **Peter Bedford** engaged with the campaign and managed to secure an uplift of around 4.5% in total, although this affected individual staff differently depending on where they sat on the pay scales. It boosted the earning potential of around 60% of staff. Significantly, Unite also won agreement to include PBHA in national collective bargaining so there is now an expectation that staff will receive the agreed cost of uplift annually.



The 2018 Pay Campaign sets 5% as the minimum uplift needed to allow salaries to remain in line with inflation. Associations can well afford this level of increase. Housing association surpluses are up 15.6% to a record £5.6 billion in 2016/17 while employment costs are down by 6.6%, falling to £3.37 billion. The workers who helped generate this wealth should also benefit from it. Therefore as part of the pay campaign, materials are being prepared for reps across the sector which include a pay briefing, a template pay

claim, posters, flyers and stickers, plus the launch of an online pay claim generator.

A significant trend has been the increase in merger activity and the creation of 'mega-associations'. The demand for individual support has inevitably spiked where Unite is present, including East Thames with London & Quadrant, Optivo (Amicus Horizon with Viridian), and Peabody with Family Mosaic. This has placed an increased demand on our reps and Regional Officer. The Thames Valley merger with Metropolitan is also on the horizon and we will make this one of our strategic targets in the year ahead.

Peabody reps rose to the challenges thrown up by the merger, informing and organising members, and winning changes to detrimental proposals. The organisation has been shameless in its treatment of staff, as one member put it:

“There must be some kind of George Orwell doublespeak at play, when Peabody staff can win online ‘Wow’ awards for ‘delivering bad news in a caring way’ ... this was a quote from an executive director ... Dark comedy. Like all such pap, Peabody’s latest staff motivational slogans have a hollow ring. Especially in the light of the sustained job losses, ‘restructurings’ and now attacks on pension provision since the merger with Family Mosaic in 2017.”

The way that the merger was managed also led Unite to consider a legal challenge which could have beneficial consequences to members there and in other merging organisation. Peabody reps are now fighting

detrimental pension changes with support from the Branch.



At **Catalyst**, a proposed new “People Deal” at continues to concern our members, and the reps have fought vibrant campaigns against detrimental changes. Catalyst derecognised trade unions some years ago and disgracefully continues to refuse to recognise Unite despite our active presence. In the absence of assured dialogue, members were forced to take industrial action over workloads, and have protested against a harsh and unfair sickness policy and work-related stress.

St Mungos reps and activists continued to build union strength in one of our best organised workplaces. There was a new round of representative elections and a range of issues were identified for future campaigning. We were sad to say goodbye to the Unite Mungos convenor Jon Hughes who was also a valued member of the Branch Committee. After his years of commitment as a rep, he has taken a break to go travelling, but we gave him a good send-off and hope to get him back again in the future.

The Homes and Communities Agency is due to split at the end of 2018, with the creation of (another) independent Regulator of Social Housing, and Homes England for land and development. To prepare for the split, Unite has recruited several new reps and launched a national recruitment drive. The recruitment runs alongside an ongoing pay dispute opposing a derisory 1% offer, and talks are due to take place at the conciliation

service ACAS. Unite members at the HCA have already shown their willingness to take industrial action if necessary, and have won improved pay and working conditions as a result in the past. They are determined to fight for better pay if necessary in the coming year too.

In 2017, we welcomed **Connections St Martins** as our newest workplace to join the branch this year, and rapidly secured a recognition agreement with the executive. This will help give our members a voice within the organisation.

While these brief reports give a taste of the workplaces where our members are active, you can see more through regular updates on our branch website (www.housingworkers.org).

Housing Justice

Two years ago, our branch set up the Housing Association Workers and Residents network to bring together those who work in the sector with those who live in their properties and use their services.



There are a number of common demands that we have been able to campaign on, such as improved resourcing of maintenance

departments, and for the voice of residents and workers to be heard during mergers and restructures. The activists involved in the Network are now in the process of setting up as Unite Community branch to help put their campaigning on a more solid and better resourced footing.

Equality and Diversity Campaigning

Homeless Migrants

Our members working in homelessness support services raised concerns about the use of frontline service staff to inform the authorities about clusters of homeless EU citizens.



We supported members who sought to resist this practice, as well as campaigning with other groups to have it stopped. The policy has now been ruled unlawful by The High Court, and Government has been ordered to cease. The policy was introduced while Theresa May was home secretary. Our members in frontline services will continue the campaign, pressurising the senior management teams to critically examine their own roles in this unethical practice.

Diversity

It came as no news to our members when research was published showing that the

majority of the sector's leadership remains white and male. Unite reps, including many from our branch, have long battled against a range of management initiatives that weaken equality and diversity. We therefore welcome the initiative by trade magazine, Inside Housing, to launch a major initiative promoting 'diversity and inclusion'. Our own campaign demands include calling for 'equality impact assessments' of policy initiatives, and for publication of data on pay, recruitment, sickness and disciplinary measures to be broken down on race and gender lines. Inside Housing reported its own evidence that would reveal discriminatory practice, but we such demands have been too often flatly refused by management in the sector. Further, many associations have moved away from clearly evaluated pay scales toward 'spot salaries' and reliance on bonus schemes. Our warnings about the equality implications of such moves have gone unheeded and management teams have been hostile to monitoring the impact of their initiatives. We will continue to pressure the sector to address diversity issues, and change its approach to working with us.

Branch Development

Training Our Reps

The development of our reps is essential if they are to have the tools for winning in the workplace. This year we have run two Reps Forums: 'Everyone's a Leader' and 'Cracking Campaigns', as well as approving Unite training for reps. We encourage all reps to review the education programme and resources through the Education section on the Unite website. If the courses don't fulfil your needs, let Adam Lambert or branch officers know so that a course can be tailored specifically to reps' needs.

Resourcing

For the last two years, we have had a Branch Organiser who was contracted to provide organising support and has helped the development of union organising in Catalyst, Sanctuary, East Thames, L&Q and elsewhere. After the end of the Branch Organiser contract, the Branch decided to subsidise the cost of a Caseworker (Accredited Support Companion) for six months. This will release our Regional Officer, Adam Lambert, from time-consuming casework and allow him to focus on collective organising and recruitment. The Branch Committee (BC) will review the effectiveness of this approach after the first three months, and make a recommendation to members on whether it should continue. The majority of the casework will be in housing associations where we have members but no representatives and the additional resource will be particularly useful as employers restructure and reorganise around mergers.

Democratic Participation

The democratic functioning of our branch and participation in the extended union structures are vital if we are to have a member-led union accountable to the membership. To maintain a healthy democracy, the branch holds meetings on the second Tuesday of every month except in August and December when we host social activities instead. We also re-elect our Branch Committee at the Annual General Meeting to ensure that we have the officers needed for the work we do, instead of operating on a 3-year cycle as the minimum required by Unite. We also sent delegates to the 2017 Sector Conferences in Brighton, and to the regional, national and executive committees of the union.

Branch Socials

With all the frenetic activity over the last year, we have taken the opportunity to relax at our popular social events in August and December. We would like to thank all of those who helped out with the hard work of organising these events.



If meetings are not for you, the socials offer a great benefit of belonging to the Housing Workers Branch. Keep an eye on our website for the dates and venues of the 2018 social activities, and do let us know if you have ideas for other events that our members might enjoy.

With Thanks

The contribution made by branch members, reps, and officers, has been magnified by the support from Unite both regionally and nationally. It would be impossible to recognise here all the individuals who deserve our thanks, but we want to mention Peter Kavanagh, Regional Secretary, Alan Scott, Regional Coordinating Officer, and Siobhan Endean, National Officer in particular for their help over the last twelve months. Most of all, we pay tribute to the energy and dedication of our Regional Officer Adam Lambert who has helped inspire so many to become committed activists across the sector.