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The Newsletter for all UNISON Stewards and Activists in the North West Region

Spring
2012

After the Health Bill – Act!

The end of March saw the Health Bill finally clearing the last hurdle in Parliament and becoming an Act – signalling the beginning of the end to the NHS. Well done to all those who fought long and hard to get the Bill defeated. Shame on the MPs and Lords who voted for it or who sat on their hands.

Despite the defeat, the opposition and campaigning will not have been wasted – the Government knows that the implementation of its plans will face even more opposition especially when more people become aware of what the small print around ‘Clause X subsection Y’ really means in practical terms.

The Government cannot be confident – and that will mean they are likely to go softly in implementing the worst clauses – for a time at least. As Unison has said, “The challenge now is for those of us who

use the NHS and those of us who work in it to resist the implementation of privatisation plans on the ground. The Government can only hand the NHS to private companies if health workers let them do it.”

Already there are discussions among GPs and those involved in “Commissioning” as how best to resist. All is not lost. We need to say clearly that the principle behind the private sector – profit – has nothing to do with the principles we work to - providing a service.

If the government does succeed in privatising different bits of the service, not only will money flow to Tory Prime Minister David Cameron’s friends, but the service will be fragmented and become unstable.

There are many interrelated parts of the bigger picture. The pensions of those working in the NHS are one. Lord Hutton openly says that the Government has to attack our pensions in order to clear the way for privatisation of the NHS and the rest of the Welfare

State. “Existing public service pensions can be

a barrier to the outsourcing and mutualisation of public services that could drive greater productivity and efficiency in public services,” he says. The intention is clear - private companies don’t want to pay for our pensions.

Pay is another part of the picture. The pay freeze for the majority of health workers has already seen a cut in wages of over 11%. The government plans to continue the freeze for all but the lowest paid. And they have to attack our pay, terms and conditions, in order to encourage private companies to take over.

So when health staff take action to defend their pay and pensions this is also part of the wider battle against the wholesale privatisation of the service.

Our view is this: Don’t stop campaigning now. We must take any chance we can to explain to our work colleagues, family, friends and neighbours what NHS privatisation will mean, and how it’s already happening. UNISON has provided excellent information – as have many community campaigns we work with, like Keep Our NHS Public.



UNISON members at the forefront of the battle to save the NHS at a rally in Albert Square in Manchester on 3 March 2012

Check out their website: www.KeepOurNHSpublic.com

Get organised at work to resist the cuts. Share information and remember to keep the regional office informed. Write to the press. Keep the pot boiling. The Government expects us to fall into line now that the Health Bill has been passed. But we need to resist more than ever if we are to defend a truly great service. The Bill is now an Act and now it’s our time to act!

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Black Members’ Conference report



A lesson in profits

Right-wing think tank, the Policy Exchange believes that private companies should be encouraged to run state schools as profit-making enterprises under a “John Lewis-style” business model. Schools where teachers were stakeholders – or partners – would create strong incentives to improve standards.

The report, entitled Social Enterprise Schools, accepts that full profit-making in schools would be politically difficult to introduce immediately! But it believes that the government should set up pilot schemes across the country to test the effectiveness of social enterprise schools.

The proposal was condemned by the National Association of Head Teachers. NAHT General Secretary Russell Hobby said: “The idea of teachers making a profit from their schools is even more unpleasant than the idea of profit-making schools in general. It will compromise their integrity and impartiality, and do huge damage to their relationship with parents, if they are suspected of making decisions based on what’s in it for them rather than what’s best for the child.”

The Department for Education said there were “no plans” for this sort of measure.

Under the proposals by the Policy Exchange, half of any profits made by the schools would be distributed as a dividend to partners on an annual basis, while the remaining half would be reinvested into the running of the school.

Anger, Hope, Action

UNISON branches across all service groups in the North West are facing a tough time as austerity cuts kick in. Our region is taking a bigger hit than most – over £5bn public spending cutbacks in the next few years – leading to a projected loss of 140,000 jobs.

Attending branch AGMs in recent weeks it seems that an epidemic of restructuring and reorganisation is taking place, with many branches fighting to block outsourcing proposals and minimise redundancies.

As a former activist who recently returned to the North West as Regional Secretary I am very impressed by the level of commitment and hard work being put in by our branch activists to deal with these challenges.

The region is determined to put in place the organising resources to enable branches to defend and extend our membership and workplace representation. In April, 11 new organising staff will join the region, including nine fighting fund

organisers who will be working in organising projects at specific employers.

The region has submitted a bid to national level for a further 15 organisers to join us in July as we roll out the organising model across the region. The 2012 joint branch assessments will be used as the basis for the region’s organising plans.

At a recent networking event for North West branch communications activists, we discussed what made for an effective communications organising strategy: Anger, Hope, and Action. Tell people what’s wrong. Explain how they can be part of the change. Ask them to do something. This approach must guide the work of all UNISON organisers, lay and full time, as we deal with the challenges posed by Con Dem austerity measures.

Kevan Nelson
Regional Secretary



Bolton Council leads the way on school meals

Bolton branch is working with Labour Link to drive home the message that Bolton’s school meals service is great – for everyone. Bolton’s school meals are the cheapest in the country at just £1.25 a day – helping hard-pressed local families. As a result the area has one of the highest take ups of school meals in the country and their popularity has created more jobs. Several local producers and suppliers also directly benefit from a council policy of using local

businesses – a direct benefit to jobs and the local economy of the town. To cap it all the service has won several prestigious awards for its performance and the nutritional quality of the meals that it provides. Last year Bolton Council won the award of ‘Local Authority Caterer of the Year’.

More information:
Martin Challender, Bolton
Communications Officer: *Martin.Challender@bolton.gov.uk*

Changes to Family Working Tax Credits

Low paid part-time workers are facing a major attack on their living standards when the Government alters the rules for Working Tax Credit in April 2012.

At the moment couples with children have to work at least 16 hours a week between both parents and earn less than around £17,700 to be entitled to Working Tax Credits. From April they will have to increase their working hours to at least 24 hours, or they will **lose their whole entitlement** to Working Tax Credit, worth £3,870 a year. The change will affect 424,000 adults with 470,000 children.

When families lose their £3,870 tax credit, many will be better off stopping work altogether and claiming benefits instead. According to the government's own figures, a couple with two children working 16 hours a week on the minimum wage, entitled to working tax credit, currently has a weekly income of around £330 a week. If they were out of work, the couple would have an income of around £271 per week. They are better off in work by £59 a week. **But after April**, unless they can increase their working hours, they will lose all their working tax credit and earn just £257 per week, **losing £73 a week and earning £14 less than if they were out of work.**

An extra 350,000 children now face poverty as families struggle to afford basic essentials, enough food and heating. They may well get into debt and homeowners may lose their homes as no support with mortgage interest will be available, as it would if they were out of work.

Families with disabled children or other caring responsibilities are obviously less able to do more hours of work. But they have not been exempted from working additional hours, even where one partner is a full-time carer. The loss of £3,870 will be a devastating additional blow to these families.

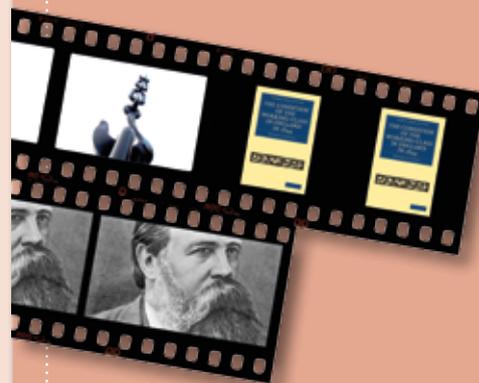
And this is so unnecessary. The new universal credit which is due to be phased in between 2013 and 2014 will abolish the criteria for working hours altogether. The new scheme will reward people for however many hours work they can do. Families will receive support that is tapered at a set rate depending on their earnings rather than their hours of work.

This year's change to working tax credit will create real hardship for hundreds of thousands of working families and their children, in exchange for a small and temporary gain to the Treasury.

The changes will hit members in local government hard. Over 60% of the workforce is part time. Members are already struggling with a three year pay freeze, high inflation and widespread attacks to terms and conditions and job losses. Many of our part-time members are forced to rely on state benefits and tax credits to lift them out of poverty.

UNISON believes that the Government needs to prioritise building jobs and growth in the economy not penalise families and couples who are sticking together and working for as many hours as they can in a harsh economic climate. The union is continuing to campaign against these unjust proposals.

Workers of the world... act!



We are shortly to begin a theatre and film project that may be of interest to your members.

We want to bring together people from the Manchester area to write and perform a series of theatrical sketches based on Frederick Engels' book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

We are filming the process and it will end up as an hour long documentary. Full details about the project are at the website address below. We are very keen to get trade unionists involved and wonder if there's anything you can do to spread the word to contacts in the Manchester area?

Interested?

Please contact Michael Wayne at: insidefilm@btinternet.com

Coming soon!

A new film, based on Frederick Engels' book. See: www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info/

Local Government Pay 2012

Major battle on pay set for 2012 and 2013

The issue of pay is set to become another major battleground in local government following the employers' refusal to offer any pay award for 2012 – the THIRD year of a pay freeze for local government staff.

To rub salt into the wounds the employers also continue to refuse to pay those earning under £21,000 the £250 rise promised to public sector staff by the Chancellor. Now it seems certain that the employers will also refuse to co-operate with the unions' referral to ACAS for binding arbitration.

The message is clear. If you work in local government you are the lowest of the low.

Pay in local government is becoming a defining issue. A recent report by the New Policy Institute, called 'Living on the Edge' highlights the fact that the value of local government staff's earnings is now lower than in 1996. Add to that numerous attacks at individual council level on pay progression and conditions of service, the failure of the employers to even bother to look at the cost of car allowances for 2011-12, the Chancellor's announcement of a further 1% limit on public sector pay awards in 2013 and 2014 and the prospect of significant inflation levels over the next 12 months

and members are caught in an increasing poverty trap.

This when current average earnings increases are nearing 3% elsewhere in the economy and the government is threatening to tear up the national local government pay system and move to a system of regional or even local pay bargaining.

UNISON's Local Government committee has now agreed to mount a high profile campaign on pay and conditions throughout 2012-13, with a view to achieving some pay increase for our members this year and building for industrial action in 2013 if there is no significant pay offer. The Committee felt that in the light of the 'live' ballot over pensions, it would not be appropriate to embark on an industrial action campaign on pay this year.

In addition UNISON along with the other unions are to lodge a complaint with ACAS for binding arbitration, write to every local authority asking them to pay the promised £250 as a consolidated payment this year to those earning below £21,000 – a shocking 70% of NJC workers.

The union has agreed to a major campaign to raise awareness amongst the public and UNISON members about the 3-year pay freeze, poverty pay and local attacks on pay

and conditions in local government. The public value of local government jobs and their undervaluing by councils and the local government employers along with the extent of low pay throughout local government will also feature.

Living on the Edge – back to the 1990s!

The news of a third year of pay freeze comes as a new report – Living on the Edge: Pay in Local Government – was published. The report produced by the New Policy Institute, shows how many of our members are now working in poverty to provide essential council services.

The report shows how our members' purchasing power has fallen to 1990s' levels because of pay freezes, below-inflation pay settlements, and the failure of employers to pay the £250 compensation payment promised by the Chancellor in June 2010.

'Living on the Edge' shows that:

■ *Eight per cent of full-time workers and 38% of part-time workers in local government earned less than the Living Wage of £7.20 per hour in 2011*

■ *69% of NJC employees earn less than £21,000 a year*

■ *Employees' purchasing power has fallen by 13% in the last two years alone as a result of inflation and pay freezes*

■ *The value of our members' pay is 10% lower than in 1996*

■ *Both full-time and part-time hourly earnings in local government are well below those in the public sector as a whole*

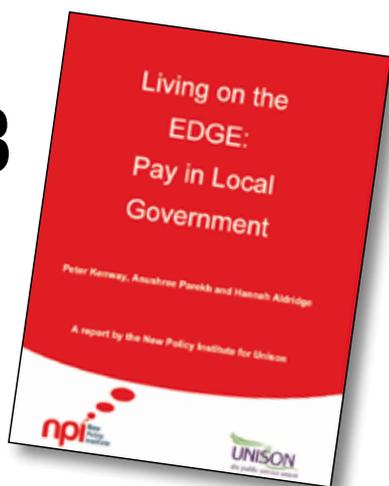
■ *Typical full-time hourly earnings have sunk back to the levels of the early 1990s and typical part-time hourly earnings to 2002 levels*

■ *Low paid local government employees usually need benefits and tax credits to keep their household out of poverty. The higher but still modest minimum income standard is rarely reached*

■ *Low paid local government workers and their families are in a financially precarious position. A change in circumstances, a reduction in hours, a child leaving school or a partner whose eligibility for contribution-based social security ceases can all take the household to the edge of poverty*

■ *Quality of service considerations are grounds for improving the pay and conditions – as well as*

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the training – of local government employees

■ *The report explains the damaging effects low pay has on local government workers and their families, as well as on local economies and the quality of vital community services.*

We know that many local authorities are also cutting pay and conditions further at a local level, while our members do the work of the large number of their colleagues who have been made redundant. Our members are now the worst paid and rewarded in the public sector and average earnings for full-time employees are below those in the private sector too. At the same time, they face possible increases in contributions to the Local Government Pension Scheme.

UNISON believes that councils now face a stark choice about the future: continue to undervalue and squeeze our members until working for local authorities becomes no more than a 'last choice' option and watch services deteriorate, or, recognise that properly treated employees are key to high quality services and pay them a decent wage for their dedication and loyalty.

A colour version of the report, 'Living on the Edge', can be downloaded at our pay campaign pages at: www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/5821.pdf

Branches get Tweeting

There's been an outbreak of Tweeting across the North West region and not just because Spring is here.



Branches have been setting up accounts using social networking media in increasing numbers. They've been trying to compress news, information and opinions into fewer than 140 characters – telling the world through Twitter what's going on.

At the networking meeting for Branch Communication Officers on 8th March there was the first ever regional Tweep up with activists getting to grips with the challenges and opportunities Twitter brings. Chair of the committee, Ashley Bramwell, commented "Twitter has great potential for communicating quickly with members but we have to learn to harness that potential and exploit it".

For the latest news from the regional office follow the UNISON North West account [@northwestunison](https://twitter.com/northwestunison).

UNISON makes creating websites easy

In the age of the internet, just about everyone who is anyone has a website.

This is hardly surprising with the number of mobile devices through which websites can be accessed on the increase. But having a website is not the same as having a good website. It not only needs to look good and be easy to use but needs to be up to date with the latest information – and this can sometimes be a problem.

Feedback from branches to the Regional Publicity and Campaigning committee suggested lots of branches wanted an easy to use system which could be maintained and updated with minimal expertise.

More than a year in the making, the UNISON North West theme for Wordpress has been developed and is now in use by a number of branches.

This system is easily installed and can be customised to meet specific branch needs but best of all can be updated by more than one user. As In Touch went to press, Trafford Local Government, Pennine Care Health, Salford Local Government, North West Ambulance Service, Lancashire County Local Government and Oldham Local Government all had sites that were up and running.

"We'd like many more branches to start using the system," said Ashley Bramwell, Chair of the Regional Publicity and Campaigning Committee. "The committee is hoping we can develop training and support for branches and really start to improve communications with members."

If your branch would like to start to use the theme contact:- j.holt@unison.co.uk



New retired members' club

Greater Manchester Fire Service Branch has set up a retired members' club. The club has its own newsletter called 'Refired' and the first edition was produced this month. The overall ring leader of our retired members is former Branch Secretary, Janice Pugh. With all the voluntary redundancies and cuts that have happened it has been good to be able to set up our own retired members' club.

Further information: Anne Farrow, Branch Communications Officer: farrowa@manchesterfire.gov.uk
Tel: 01204 905 151

Regional Women's Forum Diary Dates

Please note the following dates for the Regional Women's Forum for 2012.

Tuesday, 3 April at 11.00am - 1.00pm at Arena Point, Manchester. This is the last meeting of the year.

The new 2012-13 Forum will be elected at the **Regional Women's Conference on Saturday, 21 July** at 10.30am - 4.00pm. Please note the change of date for this meeting

Tuesday, 4 September at 11.00am - 1.00pm: AGM - new Forum meets

Tuesday, 20 November at 11.00am - 1.00pm



MPs were recently at the receiving end of a mass lobby about public libraries. UNISON along with other organisations and campaigners lobbied Parliament on 13 March to highlight the threats faced by libraries and their staff.

Even though the provision of a library service is a legal duty in some areas, half the libraries are being closed. In others, more than half will be closed unless local people can run them - as volunteers working for free.

Around 600 libraries are currently facing closure. Campaigners have been forced to challenge councils' decisions through the courts, in expensive judicial reviews. A judge branded the actions of Gloucestershire and Somerset councils as 'bad government'. Yet still there is no input or intervention from the government. How much damage to the library service will it take to make the government carry out its legal duties?

Libraries are uniquely accessible public spaces, offering a wide range of services, to communities and individuals alike. In a recession they are a vital public resource. They remain the lynchpin of communities in villages, towns and cities alike - often being the only public building left in the area. As a

flexible, free-to-use public space they are open to people of all ages and backgrounds. They offer social interaction or a safe place to come to alone. They are a uniquely trusted source of impartial information and advice. Far from being obsolete, libraries are more important than ever.

The campaign wants to see a new national vision for a modern library service with set standards, and a 'national offer' framework to support local delivery. In Scotland and Wales those core standards still exist and people have a clear idea of what they can expect from their library service. Such standards used to exist in England. We want to add our collective voice to the call for standards to be re-established.

Public library services typically amount to 1- 2% of an entire council budget. This is good value for money, given the wide range of services provided, the number of people accessing the facilities and the number of other local authority priorities that benefit from them. Libraries have already taken a disproportionate hit since 2010. An estimated 600 English libraries currently face closure.

Those that escape the axe often face significant reductions in resources, stock and staffing. These will affect libraries' ability to meet the needs of local communities. At a time of severe recession, we argue that public libraries are an essential resource - a place to access books, the internet and lifelong learning at no cost.

Want to know more?

Look for 'speak up for libraries' on Facebook. Twitter: [@SpeakUp4Libs](https://twitter.com/SpeakUp4Libs)

Or take a look at our website: www.unison.co.uk

Media superstar!

An insight into Angela Rayner

Stockport Local Government branch secretary Angela Rayner recently achieved something no one else in UNISON has ever done – a full page in *The Guardian* newspaper.

Angela featured in a lengthy article about the work of a trade unionist and interesting reading it was too. *Guardian* journalist Mark King spent the day with her and the result was a fascinating insight into the day of a branch secretary and indeed into Angela herself. “I grew up on a council estate and was pregnant at 16,

“ *everything, including the work I was doing... is part of a chain that leads up to government* ”

only able to afford clothes from a charity shop. I was told I'd never amount to anything and would be living in a council house, on benefits with loads of kids by the time I was 30. That's not me, though I wouldn't judge someone if they were in that situation. But I have three lovely kids, live in my own house and have a great job – I've had to earn respect the hard way, starting as a home help when I left school.”

One of the youngest home helps to be recruited in Stockport, she was constantly questioning management. It wasn't long



before she became the union rep and within a year she was a senior steward. “I successfully fought the privatisation of the home care service and then got to work nationally as a young members' officer. That's where I learned about politics and began to understand how everything, including the work I was doing, is part of a chain that leads up to government.”

Now in her second year as a seconded full time officer, the reporter noted that the fruits of Angela's labour were all too obvious in her branch office. The shelves, already groaning under the weight of meticulously filed records, are covered with thank you cards from employees she has helped. “If I have a really bad day, I just look up at them,” she says, “and remind myself what it's all about.”

Well done Angela – keep it up!

Sound off for UNISON

Branch Communications and Publicity Officers needed

Unity is strength; it's a basic principle of trade union organisation. But what builds unity and provides the glue that binds us together are effective communications – the ability to keep members informed, and just as importantly to make the views of members heard more widely.

UNISON is a big union and has a lot to say. There is a vital role in every branch to make sure that the union gets out its news and views to the widest possible audience. We use a range of methods to be heard; from posters and newsletters, blogs and websites, Twitter and Facebook to the age-old and best communication method there is – talking face to face. But the key to making these media work well for UNISON are activists who can take on the position of Branch Communications Officer, to help keep members and the wider world informed.

UNISON's got a great communications track record – from an award winning website to high profile campaigns that get noticed. But we need more help so we can get even more of our members informed and active. We need more people to become Branch Communications Officers, especially in those branches which currently lack them, and where the Branch Secretary could do with a bit of help.

Whatever your experience, you'll be able to use old skills and develop some new ones – training and support from the regional office is always available. Interested? To find out more contact your Branch Secretary, in the most effective form you can!

Local Government Mayors

Electors in 10 English cities will vote in May on whether to introduce elected mayors from November. The cities include Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield. There are already 14 councils with a mayoral system plus Liverpool where an election for mayor will take place on 3 May.

UNISON opposes the mayoral system because it reduces the role of ward councillors and is likely to lead to less accountability concentrating as it does power and influence into the hands of just one individual. A climate of "personality" politics is no substitute for dealing with the real issues.

Interestingly, at the same time, some other councils are doing away with their "leader and cabinet" systems in order to return to the original "committee" system where backbench councillors have much more say.

The 15 November also sees further elections – this is the day when we vote for the first time for local police commissioners. 41 Police Commissioners will be elected across England and Wales.

www.unisonnw.org.uk

JOIN US! Phone 0845 355 0845 for details and an application form.

Thanks this issue to: Ashley Bramwell, Rod Fawcett, Steve Gwilt, Judith Holt, Frances Kelly, Kevan Nelson, the Lancashire Black Members' Conference delegates, Bolton, Stockport, and Greater Manchester Fire branches and anyone else who contributed in whatever way.

Write to us c/o the Communications & Media Team at the Regional Centre, UNISON North West, Arena Point, 1 Hunts Bank, Manchester, M3 1UN or e-mail to nwmedia@unison.co.uk

UNISON National Black Members' Conference Brighton 2012

Members from Lancashire Branch thoroughly enjoyed this year's Black Members' conference.



The conference opened with a welcome from Bev Miller the Chair of the National Black Members' Committee and an address by Eleanor Smith – UNISON's first black President who talked about the struggle against racism which UNISON has led. She spoke about the support given by the union to the Stephen Lawrence campaign, the fight for justice, and the nearly twenty years of heartache and pain suffered by the Lawrence family.

General Secretary Dave Prentis highlighted the important contribution of black members within UNISON and the vital role they have to play in light of the attacks we all face from the Con / Lib Dem Coalition. He also spoke about the continued fight against the BNP and other racist and fascist organisations which threaten our workplaces, communities and society in general. "Equality is the beating heart of our union... and we will fight racism wherever it shows its ugly head."

Telling delegates that "there is still so much to do," he had special praise for Doreen and Neville Lawrence, saying that their campaign for justice had "changed our country - and for that, our union applauds them. "We must never, ever forget them or their murdered son, Stephen".

Workshops took place on challenging racism in local government, the NHS and

the workplace, developing black activists and sickle cell/Thalassemia. Fringe meetings covered matters such as the DNA database, black members and pensions, young black people and unemployment, tackling child slavery and trafficking, Show Racism the Red Card campaign and organising in social care and health.

Despite the adverse weather conditions most of the delegates stayed for undoubtedly the highlight of the conference which was the guest appearance of Mr Neville Lawrence. Before us stood a mountain of a man, almost 70 years old, who had struggled for almost two decades in seeking justice for the racist murder of his teenage son.

The whole auditorium fell silent, waiting for him to speak and what followed was a very humbling experience for all of us at conference. Fighting back tears he remembered the tremendous support which he received at the same venue in 2005 and he stated how much he owed to UNISON – he did not know how to thank us! Mr Lawrence gave a very moving personal insight into historical and recent events on his epic journey for justice.

Overall, the conference was a fantastic experience and we would urge more members to attend next year.