The murder of George Floyd is another example of the racism that blights US society. There are those who would claim that the situation in the UK is different, but that’s not true.

Message from the recently elected UNISON North West Regional Convenor – Glen Williams

A very warm welcome to all UNISON North West activists on behalf of your new Regional Secretariat. Never has there been a greater need for our collective voice to be heard in and outside of our union.

On behalf of your Regional Secretariat, I would like to pay tribute to the incredible work you are doing during this pandemic, pay respect to those who tragically have died as a result of COVID-19 and reassure you that we will do everything possible to ensure there is no ‘return to normal’ that means low pay, pay freezes, job cuts, austerity and sustained attacks on public sector workers.

I would like to thank all who voted and nominated in the Regional Secretariat election as well as saying a big thank you to Rena Wood who stepped in to cover the role when the previous holder, Paula Barker, went into semi-retirement and became an MP (joking of course!). Continued overleaf >
Message from new Regional Convenor - Glen Williams
(continued from page 1)

I was elected as Regional Convenor on a commitment ‘to create a powerful, long-term secretariat and bring forward well-trained and fresher activists to take their rightful place at the top of our region’. The creation of this long-term succession planning has already begun since taking up the post on 12th May with officers and your new secretariat.

As a practising social worker and branch secretary who holds various regional and national elected positions alongside your regional secretariat who bring with them incredible knowledge and skills, I truly believe our region and our regional secretariat team are well-placed to lead during these Covid19 challenges and beyond. Wherever you work, whatever the service group or sector, our region will seek to operate on a collective, all-inclusive and transparent basis. We will disagree, of course, but I hope we will also continue putting members, branches and our region at the heart of what we do and be simultaneously comradely and supportive.

No branch is an island (okay I accept the Isle of Man is but you get the point!) and your new secretariat will be looking to work constructively with all of you on our shared organising agenda, our regional action plan and priorities with all branches irrespective of size, status or geography. Our regional plans and priorities are matters we agree and they are not imposed ‘from above’ – we always seek activists’ views and that will continue. How we seek your views and communicate with you is already being examined and your thoughts on how to improve are always welcome so please get ‘in touch’.

As trade union activists we all face enormous challenges such as:
- COVID-19 and a safe return to work
- The organising agenda of our union
- The Branch Resources Review
- Democratic accountability within our union
- The status of public sector workers after the pandemic
- Our relationship with and within the Labour Party

I am sure you will all be able to add many more key issues but the main message from your regional secretariat is that we will work with you, listen, learn and lead and in that order.

Glen Williams, Regional Convenor, UNISON North West.

Student Nurse Survey

Second and third year student nurses have been asked to make an unprecedented contribution to the NHS’s Coronavirus response.

As the UK’s largest public services trade union, UNISON has been closely involved in discussions around how students will be supported if they choose to undertake paid work in the NHS, as well as how disruption to studies will be managed and avoided as much as possible.

Here in the North West we want to make sure that student nurses in the final 18 months of their course are being treated properly, whether they have volunteered for paid work or not.

As such we have launched a survey for student nurses to hear about their experiences, and to make sure any issues or concerns are addressed.

If you’re a nursing student, please take a couple of minutes to complete our short survey, and if you are a UNISON member someone will be in touch to follow up on any issues or concerns you identify.

The survey can be found here...

https://www.unisonnw.org/studentnursesurvey
Introducing your new Regional Secretariat Group

Regional Convenor: Glen Williams

I have been a trade union activist for over 30 years holding a range of Regional and National elected positions including Chair of the National Local Government Service Group Executive. As a practising Social Worker, Branch Secretary, parent and LFC season ticket holder some might say I have suffered enough!

I promise never to make false promises and believe actions speak louder than words - I will be inclusive and transparent, I will listen, learn and lead. I will not promise always to agree -but will always be comradely.

Deputy Convenor: Rena Wood

I have been a member of UNISON and a previous sister Union, NALGO for 35 years always in the Manchester Local Government Branch. I have been active in self-organisation for most of that time and have spoken at many events on anti-racist campaigns, gender equality and race equality. I consider myself fortunate in being able to participate as an activist in the North West region with the full support of my colleagues and the senior leadership team.

We have a very positive record of partnership working in the North West due to the level of commitment from all participants in fighting for social equality for our members and the wider community. I want to say thank you for your support during the interim period I was the Regional Convenor and I hope your support will continue during my current role as one of the two new Deputy Convenors.

Deputy Convenor: Joanne Moorcroft

I have been an active union member all of my working life. I am currently Branch Secretary of UNISON Cheshire Police Branch and a current member of the Police and Justice Service Group Executive. I am a member of the regional Campaigns and Publicity committee, and completed the 2019 Organising Academy. I am an active Labour Party member, constituency TULO and a branch Labour Link officer. Last year I was elected as Town and Borough Councillor for Cheshire West and Chester.

I am committed to supporting the development of our members enabling them to be heard and take action when necessary. We can only achieve this by implementing effective organising strategies. As a region we need to continue to look at and improve our organising capabilities and build upon our existing strengths.

Continued overleaf >
Regional President: Elaine Cotterell

I’ve been Branch Secretary of Lancashire UNISON for nearly 10 years and been a rep since the mid-1980s. Prior to becoming Branch Secretary, I held a variety of officer roles including Welfare and Membership. I cut my teeth as a rep in Libraries in Lancashire County Council but did have experience in HE when I “emigrated” to South Wales for a couple of years in the late 80’s. I couldn’t keep away from sunny Burnley and as soon as I returned to Libraries, I resumed my TU rep role. When the council merged Libraries into Education and Culture Directorate in the mid-1990s, I widened my role into schools; talk about a learning curve! During Remodelling of the School Workforce I was part of a team that successfully won an equal pay claim that resulted in thousands of our members in schools being regraded giving them the rightful recognition that school support staff deserve.

I’ve been active in the Region for quite a few years, attending the Local Government Service Group, Regional Council, Committee and Organising Committee and it has been heartening to see how our Region continues to develop political leaders and be at forefront of the campaigning and organising projects in the union. It really is a huge privilege to be elected as your Regional President, I hope I can fulfil the role as well as my predecessor, Glen Williams. I certainly have some big shoes to fill!

Vice President: Steve North

I have been Salford City UNISON Branch Secretary for nine years. I started as an Admin Assistant in Salford’s Sure Start afterwards becoming a Mental Health Community Care Worker. Before being Branch Secretary, I was a steward for five years and was Branch Young Members’ Officer until 2011, when I aged out. I have been a delegate to Regional Council for more than ten years and Regional Committee for approximately four years. I have sat on the NEC as the North West Male representative since 2017.

Chair: Pat McDonagh

I am currently Chair of NW Regional Committee and I am also the North West rep on the National Standing Orders Committee. I have also been very involved in UNISON Labour Link and I am a member of our Regional Labour Link Committee. I am the chair of Manchester Branch.

Treasurer: Jean Blevin

I have been a UNISON member, activist and officer for more than a decade. I have held roles varying from Lifelong Learning Officer and Branch Secretary to Regional Treasurer, a role that I am proud to hold today.

I have also represented members at a national level and I am a regular attendee at Health Care Committee, health sector conference and UNISON’s annual meeting of delegates. I have been a lifelong advocate for learning and skills and health, safety and wellbeing.
We must recommit ourselves to the fight against racism in all its forms

By UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis

The murder of George Floyd is another example of the racism that blights US society. There are those who would claim that the situation in the UK is different, but that’s not true.

Last year, the UK Independent Office for Police Conduct recorded a total of 276 deaths during or following police contact. Black people are overrepresented in cases including use of police force.

Racism, in all its forms, remains a part of our society. It exists when Black workers get paid less than someone else doing the same job or when they’re passed over for jobs that similarly or less qualified colleagues are appointed to. It exists when you’re more likely to be fined for breaching Coronavirus restrictions if you’re Black. And it exists too in the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black communities.

The current situation in America is horrifying, but sadly it is not surprising, nor is it unique to America. That is why we all have to commit ourselves to be actively anti-racist in our attitudes and our behaviours.

I am proud that UNISON has always been at the forefront of anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigns since our union’s earliest days.

Honouring the memory of George Floyd – and so many others – demands that we recommit ourselves to the fight against racism in all its forms. And I promise, your union will continue to play a leading role.

Mandela8 My67 Reminder

In the last edition of InTouch, we reaffirmed UNISON North West’s commitment to supporting the Mandela My67 minutes campaign during Mandela Week which will take place from 13-21 July.

The My67 programme encourages people to give 67 minutes of their day to help someone else or their community during Mandela Week. How will your branch honour Mandela Week?

Ideas for how your branch can take part in Mandela My67:
- Organise a virtual community event in Mandela’s memory in order to bring people together.
- Donate funds or resources to those in need in your local community.
- Do a 67 minute activity to raise money for a charity e.g. sponsored silence or sponsored run.
- Spend 67 minutes with isolated or lonely people in your community (in a socially distanced way or virtually).
- Give away 67 spaces for a local activity to those who may not be able to afford it.
- Film a 67 second video about what Mandela means to you and why you are supporting My67.
- Get in touch with your employer about their plans for My67.

Be creative!

If you are interested in taking part then please contact Lynne Morris: l.morris@unison.co.uk

There will be a regional (virtual) event which will take place during Mandela Week.

Full details will be circulated via email and social media.
COVID-19 Guidance

These are unprecedented, concerning times for our members and their families. The situation and Government advice is constantly changing. We set up the NW Covid-19 inbox with the aim of providing the best possible advice for members and branches.

The queries received related to the following workplace issues/rights:
- Is self-isolation and shielding counted as sickness absence or medical suspension
- Is a role classed as “essential”
- What kind of leave (if any) can be used if there are home caring responsibilities?
- HSE guidance e.g. implementing adequate social distancing measures
- Lack of provision of correct PPE – particularly in social care
- Employee Retention Scheme - Furlough
- Maternity rights
- Implementation/negotiation
- Publically-funded services
- Being redeployed
- Time off for members who are shielding themselves or dependants
- Caring for Covid-19 clients in domiciliary care settings (PPE + Risk assessments)
- Risk assessments for staff returning from any leave
- Safe return

Here are some FAQs which may be useful for activists when advising members.

What if, following the UK government’s announcement on 10 May, I now need to return to work? Employers should make every reasonable effort to enable staff to work from home in the first instance. If this is not possible, then before you can return to your normal workplace your employer should undertake a risk assessment to make it ‘COVID–secure’.

What is a risk assessment? A risk assessment is what an employer must do to keep their workers and anybody else who may use their workplaces, safe from harm. COVID-19 may cause you harm so employers must therefore put in place measures to prevent its spread. More details on what a risk assessment is can be found on our Risk Assessments page.

What if I can’t get to work because of transport closures? Let your employer know if you’re struggling or unable to get to work because of transport closures. Government advice is that people should work from home, unless it is ‘absolutely necessary’ that they travel to work. If home working really isn’t possible then your employer should agree flexible working hours to allow access to public transport, access to free parking or consider providing private transport, for example, taxi.

Testing for key workers
The UK Government announced on 28 March that all essential workers who are self- isolating can self-refer and book a coronavirus test.

Tests won’t tell you if you have previously contracted coronavirus, so you should only request one if you or someone in your household currently has coronavirus symptoms. As an essential worker, all members of your household can also get tested. Testing is voluntary and your employer should not insist you request a test. If you are over 65 and have symptoms you can also take the test. Testing is most effective within three days of symptoms developing.

Book a test directly on the Government’s self-referral page. You can select a regional test site drive-through appointment or a home test kit. The online booking system has been experiencing problems due to demand, but if you encounter problems, keep trying.
What happens if I get a negative test?
If you are well enough and have had no temperature for the last 48 hours you can return to work. This will only apply if no other member of your household tests positive, or has coronavirus symptoms.

What happens if I get a positive test?
If your test result is positive, or someone you live with tests positive, you should not return to work and you should continue to self-isolate.

Can I get help to pay my bills?
If you are on a low income you may be entitled to Universal Credit. The government announced on 20 March that Universal Credit will be increased by £20 per week (£1,000 a year). Working Tax Credit will also be increased by £20 per week (£1,000 a year). The increase starts from 6 April.

You might also be entitled to more help with your rent. The government has announced that the Local Housing Allowance will be increased to cover more people’s rents.

Use our benefits checker to see what you’re entitled to

UNISON’s charity There for You can also offer help if you are in financial difficulty.

What if my employer is considering layoffs or redundancies?
As a result of the coronavirus crisis, many workplaces have been closed and employees have been asked to work from home if they can. However, some jobs cannot be done from home and some employers have therefore considered lay-offs and redundancies. The UK government has announced details of the Coronavirus JobRetention Scheme.

Employers can use this scheme to retain their staff until they can re-open for business, rather than make staff redundant. They can ‘furlough’ employees and apply for a grant that covers 80% of their usual monthly wage costs.

What is a furloughed worker?
To access the Job Retention Scheme employers need to designate affected employees as ‘furloughed workers,’ and notify their employees of this change. Furloughed workers are unable to work because their workplace has been forced to close due to the coronavirus. If you are furloughed, this will change the status of your employment relationship – your contract. This change in employment status remains subject to existing employment law and, depending on your employment contract, may be subject to negotiation.

Who decides whether someone is furloughed?
An employer decides who is to be furloughed. In choosing staff to be furloughed, employers will have to consider discrimination laws and the implied duty of ‘mutual trust and confidence’. Employers are likely to seek volunteers. As this will require a variation of an employee’s contract, an employee’s consent is required before they go on furlough.

Can I work while on furlough?
No, you cannot work and you cannot provide services or generate income.

Do I need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)?
This depends on what you do, where, and with who you work. You are more likely to require PPE if you are providing direct care to service users, or cleaning premises contaminated by COVID-19.

For other groups of staff other measures such as working from home, hand hygiene, social distancing and shielding those most at risk are more effective. The best protection against COVID-19 is, if possible, to remove yourself from any sources of infection. That is why UNISON has campaigned to make employers comply with social distancing guidelines.

Sometimes, keeping two metres apart is not practical, for example, when you are looking after children in schools or caring for vulnerable adults. This will mean that some form of PPE may be required. Our PPE guide provides further advice on this.

It’s important that PPE is concentrated on those who need it most and who are trained in its use. Unnecessary and incorrectly used PPE may put you, your colleagues, family and friends at additional risk. The virus lives longer on plastics than ordinary clothes, so if not correctly used and disposed of items such as masks can become vessels for spreading infection.

If it is absolutely necessary that you go to work, it’s vital your employer considers all measures to keep you safe. Where measures such as social distancing and workplace adjustments have failed or are insufficient your employer will need to consider other measures. These include providing you with the correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to do your job safely.

UNISON has asked government ministers to resolve problems with the supply of equipment and to provide clearer advice about what you need to protect you at work.

There is a 24-hour employer helpline to report any shortages in health and social care providers in England.

We have a page of PPE detailed advice here.

All enquiries regarding the Coronavirus outbreak, including requests for advice on individual situations, collective matters, or regarding employers’ responses / implementation processes should be sent to NWcovid-19@unison.co.uk.
The Office for National Statistics revealed shocking figures last month. Care workers are twice as likely to die from coronavirus than frontline NHS workers.

The simplest explanation for this tragedy is that, unlike the NHS, social care is a fragmented and privatised sector which requires the undermining of resources and terms and conditions to maximise profits for private providers. Ultimately, it is workers and service-users that end up paying the price.

Our survey of 2,800 care workers found that 8 out of 10 of them would not receive their full normal pay if they were ill, had to self-isolate or shield because of COVID-19. As a result, many staff are forced to attend work when ill or when they should shield. This severely increases the risk of spreading disease among staff and service-users.

One member, who received a formal letter from the NHS advising her to shield because she had a brain tumour last year said that she couldn’t afford to be off work and therefore had to continue to work on her minimum wage zero hour contract. Her employer refused to furlough her and now she is attending work against official medical advice and exposing herself to the risk of infection.

This example is all too common across the social care sector and illustrates the importance of UNISON North West’s Care Workers vs COVID-19 Campaign which is calling on commissioning authorities to give care workers the support and resources they need to combat the virus. This includes demands for proper access to testing, appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and full normal pay for all coronavirus-related absence.

We are delighted about the progress made since the campaign was launched in March 2020. Branches and the region have worked together to secure a number of significant victories:

- Nine North West commissioning Councils have signed up to the Care Workers vs COVID-19 Campaign or made commitments in line with the campaign demands. The councils are: Cheshire West and Chester, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Manchester, Salford, Sefton, Trafford and Wirral
- Wirral Council has also committed to the Foundation Living Wage for all their care workers
- Over 8,000 concerned members of the public have signed our Care Workers vs COVID-19 petition
- Nearly 100 councillors within the North West and 14 MPs have signed our Care Workers vs COVID-19 pledge
- The campaign has featured in a range of media locally, regionally and nationally. One of our members wrote a column for the Guardian and the campaign was mentioned in the House of Commons and on BBC Newsnight
- Over 1,000 new social care members have joined UNISON in the North West during the campaign
- Stockport MP Nav Mishra mentioned our survey of care workers in a question to the Government about sick pay provision in social care. Matt Hancock responded by saying that the £600m Infection Control Fund is intended to guarantee care workers can self-isolate without suffering financial detriment. This huge national breakthrough now requires local campaigning to ensure that this funding is passed on by local authorities to employers and then on to care workers.

Social care members have been at the heart of pushing the campaign forward. They have been involved in photo pledges, campaign videos, speaking to the media, meeting politicians and councillors, joining workplace meetings (all virtually, of course), and getting involved online on social media.

The results so far are fantastic – but there’s still so much more that can be done and so many more councils to sign-up to the campaign. Here’s how you can get involved with the campaign:

1) Sign and share our Petition – If you’ve not already done so https://action.unison.org.uk/page/58242/petition/1
2) Ask your council to sign and support the campaign pledge – If your council commissions social care services, ask them to sign the Care Workers vs COVID-19 Campaign Pledge.
3) Follow the campaign on social media, sharing content with care worker members – We are @CareVsCov19 on Twitter and Care Workers Vs COVID-19 on Facebook
The ongoing pandemic has affected almost all aspects of life, and our ability to communicate with members has been affected. The lockdown period has presented challenges for union activists who can no longer communicate with members through more traditional methods such as workplace walkarounds.

In spite of this, many branches in the region have taken an innovative approach to communicating with members and have increased their capacity for digital organising during this period. The ways we communicate with our members have changed for good. Here are 10 digital communication tools your branch could use during the pandemic and beyond.

**Zoom:** Zoom is a useful tool for arranging video calls and works well for private calls (e.g. branch committee) or public calls (e.g. a digital rally). UNISON national office have instructed staff not to use Zoom on UNISON IT equipment but (when used on non-UNISON equipment) it remains the best free video conferencing option and allows for “breakout rooms”, screen sharing and more. Make sure your Zoom meetings are password protected.

**WhatsApp:** Instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp can be a useful way for the branch committee to stay in touch. You can create a group chat in WhatsApp easily. YouTube tutorial here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2zeE4_78BF8

**Facebook Live:** Facebook Live can be used effectively as a protest tool and branches including Wirral and Salford City UNISON have already harnessed its potential effectively. Facebook Live allows you to broadcast video to those who like your page in real time. If you need multiple people who are in different locations to appear on camera at once, it can be used in collaboration with Zoom: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/11500350406-Streaming-a-meeting-or-webinar-on-Facebook-Live

**WhatsApp:** WhatsApp is a useful way to keep in touch with groups of members, although bear in mind that you will need to check it regularly if you choose to set one up. Facebook groups should be set to closed or secret and you should pin a post to the top of the group laying down the “ground rules” for members to avoid them getting into trouble with employers. Some useful info at: https://www.facebook.com/community/

**Facebook Groups:** Facebook groups can be a useful way to keep in touch with groups of members, although bear in mind that you will need to check it regularly if you choose to set one up. Facebook groups should be set to closed or secret and you should pin a post to the top of the group laying down the “ground rules” for members to avoid them getting into trouble with employers. Some useful info at: https://www.facebook.com/community/

**Slack:** Slack is a useful tool for discussion and collaboration between activists. You can set up different conversation streams (e.g. Local Government, Schools, Social Care etc.) and share files and best practice.

**Email:** Used correctly, email is our most effective communication tool. Do not email too often as members will stop opening them. Do not include too much content and try to avoid the email becoming too text heavy. Try to keep emails short and sweet and link out to longer articles/actions members can take so that members are able to quickly digest the email and decide for themselves which content is most relevant to them.

**Website:** It’s difficult to give specific advice as different branches are using different website systems, but it’s more important than ever that information on your website is up to date especially contact info!

**Public social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram):** Many branches already have public social media profiles and now is a great time to ensure they’re populated with relevant content. Use post scheduling on Facebook and Twitter to ensure that your posts are shared at times when your followers are actually online to see them. On Twitter, tweet pretty much as often as you like. On Facebook or Instagram, post only once or twice a day (apart from Story posts, which can be more frequent). If you haven’t already, email out the details of your social media channels to your members so that they can keep up to date.

Continued overleaf >
UNISON appalled at revelation that some of Nightingale Hospital Manchester’s healthcare heroes are being underpaid

UNISON has uncovered the concerning news that some cleaners, porters, catering assistants and security guards at the NHS Nightingale Hospital in Manchester are receiving less pay from night and weekend shifts than their colleagues who do exactly the same jobs in other NHS hospitals.

The facilities management staff at the GMEX-based facility - who are at the forefront of efforts to stop the spread of coronavirus - are employed by private contractor Interserve rather than by the NHS. Interserve are not paying staff the nationally agreed NHS rates for the job, meaning that the Nightingale North West’s dedicated staff may lose out compared to NHS employed staff doing the same jobs elsewhere.

The private contractor pays less than the NHS does for night and weekend work, risking leaving some staff out of pocket if they work unsocial hours. Interserve employed hospital cleaners are currently being paid £5.89 per hour less for a Sunday shift than their NHS counterparts, and £1.01 per hour less for night and Saturday shifts.

UNISON has repeatedly asked hospital bosses to top up the pay of any Nightingale Hospital staff who are disadvantaged by Interserve’s pay rates to ensure that they are not worse off than their NHS employed colleagues.

These requests have been rejected by hospital managers.

UNISON Regional Organiser James Bull said: “Porters, domestics and security staff are already amongst the lowest paid workers in our National Health Service – and yet the work they do is absolutely vital to ensuring patients receive the best possible care in a clean, comfortable and safe environment. Their work has never been more important.

“The people who have answered the call to work for Interserve at Nightingale NW are exposing themselves to increased risk by cleaning clinical areas, supporting patients and providing vital services on the front line of this global health emergency. It’s appalling to think that they may be short-changed for their crucial contribution to the national effort during this pandemic.

“The least they deserve in return is the same pay as an NHS worker in a hospital would expect under normal circumstances. Essential workers deserve respect- their pay should not be a lottery based on the hours they work.”
Only 2% of employees felt reassured by the Prime Minister saying it was safe to open schools more widely from 1 June.

Almost all staff (96%) felt ministers hadn’t put safety first when developing their back to school plans, according to the survey of 45,200 school support staff.

More than three in five (61%) of staff surveyed were already working in schools – on a rota basis or full-time throughout the lockdown – so are well aware of the challenges of operating in schools during the pandemic.

Workers’ confidence in their own schools’ ability to be ready for a wider opening in June was low. Just over three quarters (77%) didn’t feel their school would have the resources to cope with the additional responsibility of putting health, safety and risk assessments in place in time.

As well as the threat to their own health, staff were concerned about the impact of a rushed return on their own children.

Of those with school age children, 95% said they didn’t feel it was safe to send them back to school. One worker said she was ‘petrified’ at the thought of her seven-year-old going back.

Commenting on the findings, UNISON Head of Education Jon Richards said: “The survey sends out a strong message that ministers shouldn’t gamble with the safety of pupils, staff and the wider community by sending them back to school too early.

“It makes no sense for there to be such a push for schools to open more widely in England, while other parts of the UK are taking a much more considered approach.

“The government must commit to a safe and structured return. There’s little confidence in ministers’ plans, that’s clear to see. Staff, parents and schools aren’t ready to go back without reassurances that safety is the number one priority.

“Unions want to work with ministers to make schools as safe as possible, so that parents, their children and staff will want to return. But the rush to get some schools open to meet an arbitrary date isn’t at all helpful.”

A teaching assistant working with reception age children (five-year olds) and year 1 (six-year olds) said: “I haven’t seen my school’s risk assessment. I don’t feel schools are ready for all pupils to come back. Plans haven’t been thought through properly. I’m sure with time they’ll find a way, but it’s happening too soon. There’s a broad one size fits all plan that doesn’t fit anybody. I wouldn’t want to wear a mask at school because it would be worrying and traumatic for the children. But as things stand, I wouldn’t be happy to go into work without one.”

UNISON North West’s position is as follows:

“UNISON, along with other education unions, has set out five key tests, which we believe must all be satisfied before it can be considered safe to reopen or expand the opening of any school. The joint unions are in constant dialogue with government on this matter and have set out our position clearly in recent correspondence to local authorities, head teachers and multi-academy trusts.

It remains the view of the joint unions that in the current circumstances and with reference to the 5 tests it will not be safe to reopen or expand school opening on the arbitrarily selected date of 1st June.

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Alongside the frontline health and care staff, there are people around the UK keeping essential services going, who are largely forgotten as they too face serious dangers or are being overwhelmed with work.

They include refuse collectors, housing officers, social workers and teaching assistants whose work must continue but who are often unable to keep a safe distance or not “entitled” to safety kit.

Some are handling more potentially hazardous waste or facing other daily problems such as an increase in abuse as a result of lockdown measures.

UNISON has written to Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick, asking for proper risk assessments for these workers and a wider distribution of protective equipment (PPE) to cope with the dangers they’re facing. But staff are still facing problems.

Among those facing added pressures are: Refuse workers, particularly those working for private contractors who are forced to sit in close contact in the cab. Some sensible employers have redeployed drivers to minibuses to take staff to their routes allowing correct social distancing.

Crematorium and cemetery workers who’ve faced virus risks where families have refused to follow the limit on numbers at funerals. Some have also faced abuse when they’ve challenged groups congregating in cemeteries.

Housing workers who run a wide range of risks. They deal with emergency situations such as domestic violence incidents, carry out emergency housing repairs and work with the homeless to get them into hostels and other accommodation.

Trading standards staff who are looking into hundreds of coronavirus scams and online ‘phishing’ attempts, as well as dealing with distressed older people who have been duped.

One refuse collector said, “We have concerns about government guidelines over distancing. It’s less than a metre from shoulder to shoulder in a cab. Also our people don’t feel safe doing their job because of the risks of contamination from old tissues, disposable gloves and the like.”

One social worker said, “PPE in children’s services is only available for home visits where it’s known
that someone has Covid-19. But sometimes it may be unknown and the signs are not necessarily fever and cough (and anyway there’s a five-day incubation period). We need PPE when we are seeing anyone who is unwell. Also, the recommendation is to wash your hands before entering and on leaving a home. But no hand gel, soap or wipes are provided to us for this.”

UNISON is calling for urgent talks with the government to discuss the concerns of these members and help to tackle them.

Adding insult to injury, the national local government employers are insisting that their offer of 2.75% for NJC pay 2020/21 is final. And although they have agreed to go to government to ask for extra cash the employers have point blank refused to include a call for more money for pay as part of that approach. This is both unfair and unnecessary and a kick in the teeth to workers on this forgotten frontline.

It is now clear that despite two injections of cash to local councils, local authorities will be in real financial trouble soon.

Across Greater Manchester, councils estimate that these extra funds cover only a third of the huge increase in expenditure on coronavirus support (combined with a significant loss of revenue from income generation and fee-based services).

Liverpool City Region is facing a shortfall of £250 million. The story is the same across the country with the most deprived areas hit hardest. In March, the Government publicly said that “local government will get what it needs” but they are now rowing back on that promise.

It is clear that without more funding now and - just as importantly - a sustainable footing in the medium-term, then councils of all colours will be forced to cut services and jobs at a time when the country will be in recession.

Support staff have little confidence in government school safety plans
(continued from page 11)

However, UNISON is not advising its members to avoid taking part in legitimate and reasonable advance planning and preparatory work. Where the union is satisfied a comprehensive risk assessment is in place, which creates a ‘COVID-19 secure place’ for employees, we should attend the workplace for planning and preparatory work.

If UNISON is of the view, in the specific circumstances of the school, that it is not safe for a member to attend the workplace or to do the work requested then we are obliged to advise the member of their statutory rights and to remind the employer of its statutory duties and responsibilities.

Where UNISON members do take part in advance planning and preparatory works, whether that is remotely or at the workplace, it should not be taken by the employer as an express or implied indication that UNISON or the member believes it will be safe to reopen or expand the opening of the school on 1st June or any arbitrary date thereafter. There may also be other legitimate reasons for an employee not to attend work, such as self-isolation or shielding, but we would not anticipate any responsible employer requesting such employees should be recalled.”

UNISON is calling for urgent talks with the government to discuss the concerns of these members and help to tackle them.
This pandemic has postponed elections, ruled out door-knocking and leafleting, put evening and weekend meetings online and cancelled the 2020 national Labour Conference in Liverpool.

Yet, important though such public campaigning and policy making are in the long term, politics has not ended for the duration. The issues have sharpened and deepened. More than ever our members have needed a political voice to protect their safety and wellbeing at work and home.

Labour Link has risen to this challenge, supporting our campaign for carers in social care, lobbying on health and safety and local government finances and has challenged the creeping privatisation of services during the crisis.

We have had a positive response from North West Labour MPs, Labour Mayors, Labour Police and Crime Commissioners and Labour Councillors who are supporting our campaigns and raising our questions in the corridors of power.

We have been heartened through all this by the election of Angela Rayner, one of our own, to Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. Her support has been constant in the matters we have raised.

We make no apology for criticising or lobbying during a national emergency. This has been crucial as our members have faced daily risks and unions have helped to protect frontline workers. At times like these the need for a strong political voice is more evident than ever and the importance of Labour Link is now plain for all to see.

We have no illusions; this crisis was made far worse than it needed to be after ten years of austerity has left us ill-prepared. At times the Government response has been both belated and tragic; continually running to catch up, for example prioritising social care only when deaths in care homes increased tenfold in a week.

They have continually had to answer questions that we and other unions are raising both directly, and through our partnership with Labour politicians.

Union success in influencing some policies, such as furlough rather than sackings, must be continued. There can be no repeat of austerity as the crisis recedes and those who have been last must be first.

All experience shows, this will not do itself. A clue to the battle we face is given by continued, under the radar privatisation, despite its record in failing our public services. They clap our carers on a Thursday and undermine our COVID response behind our backs.

They are using the pandemic to facilitate a power grab by their privateer backers and friends as they transfer NHS duties and other state bodies to the private sector.

They are stripping out normal tendering processes, transparency and scrutiny to hand contracts to companies with dubious qualifications. Private firms are being involved in call- tracing, in the purchasing of PPE and drive-in test centres, rather than building up NHS capacity.

In Manchester, this has seen key services in the Nightingale Hospital, built to boost NHS capacity, offered to Interserve, where staff were offered less pay for weekend and night shift working; short-changing those taken on to help provide vital care in the crisis. This has prompted our local branch to ask the NHS trusts to make up the shortfall, something we should not have to do, yet this request has been rejected.

There are already £9 billion of private contracts within the NHS. Labour Link has written to all North West Labour MPs to stand up for our NHS at this crucial time, and has received a strong and warm response. In the months ahead, we will be focussing on the black hole in local government finances which, without sustained and greater support, will see services annihilated.

A crisis like this stretches political tensions to their limit, but we will continue to support our members’ organisational and bargaining campaigns to help ensure decent, well funded and paid public services.

With record recruitment of members who can see more than ever why they need the support of a union, we need to convince them that a union with a political fund, and therefore a voice, is an even better source of support.
Throughout the health emergency UNISON has been working with HE and FE employers to ensure our members are protected. Protection not only in terms of employment, but also by ensuring that members’ health, safety and welfare is paramount.

We know that employers are looking at ways in which they can start a process of re-opening services, and this will be causing a great deal of concern for our members, UNISON is clear that workers should only return to the workplace when it is safe to do so. Further information and advice can be provided by your branch or take a look at the UNISON website.

Throughout your representatives have met regularly via video conferencing and have continued to organise effectively on behalf of members.

The impact this period has had on both HE and FE is considerable and we are now seeing employers coming out and stating how much income they are predicting to lose. It is clear that without crisis funding from the government our members could be paying the price for years to come.

UNISON in Higher Education has now launched the ‘Don’t Fail Our Future’ campaign which highlights the value of higher education to the country for staff, students, public services and the economy. You can find more information here:

https://www.unison.org.uk/our-campaigns/protect-higher-education/

The financial impact of COVID-19 on the FE sector is also serious. FE was significantly underfunded to start and Colleges will have lost their commercial funding because of the crisis. Even maintaining current funding levels in FE next year would not be acceptable and would not make up the shortfall.

We see that this crisis is leading to record job losses and young people are amongst the hardest hit. FE needs to be there to help these young people gain skills and valuable qualifications so they will be able to find jobs in the future.

If the UK is to recover from the huge recession that is looming it needs to look to its Further and Higher Education sectors.

Here in the North West we will continue to do what we do best; campaigning, lobbying and fighting at all levels to get the message heard, protecting our members and the vital education services they provide.