Facility time under attack: an injury to us all

The cuts budget for 2009-10, adopted by the Liberal Democrat/Conservative partnership administration, packed an especially nasty sting in the tail for Camden staff. While claiming that a two-year freeze on Council Tax would somehow create a ‘feel good factor’ for Camden residents midst the recession, the administration launched an overtly political attack on its recognised trade unions.

At the end of January a briefing by senior managers to UNISON branch officers had suggested that Council Tax would rise by 2%-2.5% with no further cuts envisaged. Just over a fortnight later, however, a new budget emerged featuring a further £2.5 million in cuts, including a swingeing attack on trade union facilities.

According to management’s own estimate, which we hotly contest, UNISON membership among Camden employees paying subs at source is very close to the ‘magic’ figure of 3,000 and has fallen by only 7% over the course of the past three years despite the privatisations associated with the ‘Better and Cheaper’ programme.

Branch members are already recognising the significance of this attack, highlighted by the unanimous vote in support of a campaign to defend union facility time at the 160 strong Annual General Meeting on 9 March. This cut poses a serious threat to effective trade unionism in the Council, damaging UNISON’s ability to campaign for our collective interests. It could even threaten our capacity to ensure adequate representation to members in disciplinary, grievance and sickness/absence proceedings.

Against the background of continuing job cuts and out-sourcings in Camden, the ongoing pay and grading review, and the prospect of a major assault on the Local Government Pension Scheme in the near future, the importance of a determined, effective union cannot be overstated. That’s why it is vital that members spread the word about the threat to union facilities among their workmates, while the branch itself continues to recruit new members and rebuilds its stewards’ organisation.

George Binette
Vice-chair and convenor Central Services

A reminder to all UNISON members – please check your pay slip carefully if you have your subs deducted by Camden’s Payroll section, especially if you have recently changed jobs or returned from maternity or extended sick leave. Over the past year a significant number of members have had their subs stopped without their consent. This leaves individuals at risk of losing their entitlement to representation and contributes to the underestimation of UNISON membership across Camden.

Branch Officers old and new: George Binette, Vice Chair; Barry Walden, Joint Branch Chair; Liz Leicester, previous Branch Chair; Phoebe Watkins, Joint Branch Chair; David Eggmore, Branch Secretary

Photo: Phil Lewis
In addition to defending council housing Alan was at the forefront of fighting the Nazis in his area. When we heard that the BNP were standing in the Kentish Town by election last year, my first thought was for Unite Against Fascism to hold a public meeting at the obvious venue Peckwater TA Hall – where Alan was chair. A pre-meet took place in Alan’s front room where he had already printed off posters: ‘Keep Kentish Town Nazi Free’. A list was drawn up of all the people we knew in the area, covering all the streets and estates, people we would ask to leaflet – Alan, of course, was a major contributor to this list. His local knowledge being invaluable.

Some years ago Alan was targeted by Nazis who had daubed graffiti on his block with racist messages and personal threats. His response was brilliant. He immediately got together a group of tenants’ reps, trade unionists and other anti-racists, including the ex-Labour councillor Bernard Kissen, for a very public show of our strength. The painting out of the graffiti was featured in the local paper and gave the BNP the clear message that they are not welcome here.

Barry Walden
Branch Chair (job share)

I knew Alan for 25 years, from when I first became a NUPE shop steward in Camden. I always appreciated his dedication to the trade union movement. There is huge appreciation for all the support that Alan Walter and DCH gave to us as Housing Caretakers, through the No to ALMO’s campaign and their continued support against privatisation of Camden’s caretaking services.

I hope that the branch makes a donation that would help DCH to continue with the campaign in his memory.

Stuart Doran
Residential caretaker

Alan was instrumental in winning the historic ‘NO’ vote against the ALMO in Camden in 2004. He was the person who took the initiative in building a huge public meeting for tenants, unions and supporters back when the first ideas of an ALMO were suggested. His tireless campaigning, organisation and expectation that we could win helped keep legions of tenants, trade unionists and campaigners on board for the fight. I can remember when we finally got the outcome of the tenants’ ballot, it was fantastic. Union members and tenants across the country celebrated, but without the determination and attention to detail Alan had, we would not have been as successful as we were. His death is a huge loss to both Camden and the wider campaigning movement to Defend Council Housing provision as an essential part of our futures. He was a great friend of the tenants’ movement, the trade union movement, the socialist movement and to the many other anti-racist and progressive campaigns he was involved in both nationally and locally.

Phoebe Watkins
UNISON Co-Convenor HASC
Draconian decision overturned

Brian Battershill, a caretaker (aged 63) was sacked in October 2008 because he had been off work due to serious problems with his knee. He had followed medical advice all along and tried less invasive surgery which did not work, so finally had to have a full knee replacement in mid 2008. Because of the delay in the NHS getting the successful treatment planned in, he had to attend sickness absence meetings despite having an excellent sick record prior to his knee problem. Much of his time off sick was due to waiting time on NHS lists!

In October 2008, when he was sacked, no proper consideration of redeployment or ill health retirement was made. Pressure was put on him to go back to work temporarily in another sedentary role. This would have exacerbated his knee problem. No further medical evidence was sought by management to back up his case there. The only consideration used by the manager was his length of time off. All the medical indications were that he was recovering as planned. Brian hoped that the final appointment with his consultant would confirm he was able to return to work in January 2009.

Lessons to learn: Despite Camden claiming to understand the expectation of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) no account was taken of his needs when recovering from planned surgery which he needed to maintain his mobility nor of any ‘reasonable adjustments’ that could have also made allowances for his longer time off work. No real research was done into whether he could have been considered for alternative work and what effect that would have had on his disability and no consideration was given to whether he would have met the requirements for early retirement.

Given the fact that he was within 18 months of reaching the statutory retirement age of 65, Camden showed little sympathy with him and little consideration of their ‘duty of care’ to an employee. Managers can still behave in a draconian fashion, just looking at an employee’s length of time off without consideration of other factors often determined by the length of time for treatment and DDA considerations.

Phoebe Watkins, Co-convenor HASC, writes on a case with lessons for Camden

EYE VIEW

Defending the public sector

All three main parties talk about cutting back on the public sector from 2010. They proclaim that the ‘age of excess’ is over. For most council workers there never has been a golden age.

The credit crunch, which governments are throwing trillions of pounds or dollars at to solve, was caused by excesses in the private sector and involved fabulously wealthy individuals. It’s Fred the Shred and his ilk that should pay not teaching assistants, cleaners and caretakers.

Inequality is bad for your health

For thirty years we have been told that inequality was something not to be worried about. Famously, Peter Mandelson said of New Labour: ‘we are intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich’.

Now an important new study The Spirit Level, backed by a mass of evidence, demonstrates that inequality does matter. It shows that almost all social problems which are more prevalent at the bottom of the social ladder are more common in more unequal societies such as the US and UK. Such societies have higher levels of murder, mental illness, teenage pregnancies and so on. Inequality affects everyone. A more egalitarian society is a healthier one.

The Spirit Level by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. Order it from your local library.
The 25th anniversary of the great 1984-85 miners’ strike is a time to look back and remember a fascinating and inspiring period. The year-long strike had a profound impact on me and many of my colleagues who were working in Camden Council at the time.

We twinned our union branch with the miners’ wives action group in the Yorkshire pit village of Bentley, and collected thousands of pounds from council workers for the miners and their families. We held meetings and conferences to mobilise support for the strike – I have still kept the leaflets, posters and stickers we produced.

Why did the miners’ strike galvanise so many Camden council workers into organising solidarity action, even though we were hundreds of miles away from the pit communities? The Tory government had been in power for five years and had been systematically attacking one group of workers after another with the stated aim of breaking the power of the unions. The miners were traditionally the best organised workers in the country, and we felt that if the miners were defeated it would be a blow to all workers.

I worked in the Camden Housing Benefits department and was a NALGO shop steward (the forerunner to UNISON). I remember that early on in the strike we invited some miners from the Kent coalfields to come and speak to our shop meeting to tell us why they had gone on strike. As one of the leaflets of the time put it: ‘Miners are fighting for the right to work, to protect not only their jobs, communities and self respect, but those of the younger generation’.

As the strike went on miners’ support groups sprang up all over the country. Our Camden group met on a weekly basis in what was then the staff restaurant on the top floor of the Town Hall Extension, with workers attending from across the council. We organised weekly collections among our colleagues to raise money to help sustain the strikers families – at the height of the strike we were collecting £500 or so a week. This wasn’t charity – it was very much seen as a political act of solidarity – as our miners support group leaflets put it: ‘Their fight is our fight’. At Christmas there was a major appeal for presents. People were incredibly generous. A lorry load of gifts were collected and driven up to Yorkshire.

The memories from that time that have stayed with me most vividly are of the trips to our twinned pit village of Bentley. In one such trip in October 1984 some 30 Camden council workers travelled up and were warmly welcomed into striking miners homes. I remember I stayed with the family of Bobby Buckle, who was one of the mainstays of Bentley Women’s Action Group. It was exciting to see how the strike had transformed the lives of many miner’s wives, turning them from housewives into political activists, which in turn challenged the traditional views of their men folk about what a ‘woman’s place’ should be.

I will never forget the determination of the miners and their families.

At a time when so many communities are once again faced with the grim toll of unemployment, we have a lot to learn from the spirit of solidarity of those times.

Manual workers were then represented by NUPE. Judith Orr, a NUPE Steward and worker in the Home Care Blitz Team at the time, adds; ‘Camden NUPE were twinned with Hatfield Main pit. We had a weekly levy and though NUPE workers were amongst the poorest paid Council workers people gave generously. There were several delegations up to Hatfield Main. We had a special NUPE badge made to help raise funds for a Christmas appeal. The late Alan Walter, then a steward in the Boiler Section, played a major role in organising support for the miners.’

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**Giving UNISON members a helping hand**

Michael Anderson has recently taken over as treasurer of the Camden UNISON Members’ Fund. Camden Eye asked him what the fund was for?

“The fund helps UNISON members in the branch who are facing immediate, severe financial difficulties. We can help out by giving a loan to do things like pay rent arrears if someone is facing eviction, is threatened with disconnection because of an unpaid bill or travel costs if a member needs to attend the funeral of a close relative abroad. The fund is looked after by trustees — ordinary branch members, and all of the money comes from our own branch.”

How can Camden UNISON members get help?

‘Two trustees will have a confidential chat and if there is something the Fund can do to help, we will write out a cheque straightaway. The money is paid back in ten monthly instalments. The branch has been very generous with money but what we really need is for more people to come on board as trustees. You will probably be called on two or three times a year.’

If you want to find out more about the fund or think you could become a trustee, contact the branch office or preferably contact Michael to find out more (email Michael.Anderson@camden.gov.uk Telephone: 020 7974 3228).

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**Visteon workers occupy their factories**

Issued with redundancy notices at a few minutes notice Visteon workers responded by occupying their factories in Enfield, Basildon and Belfast on 1 April. There was a mass rally outside the Enfield factory on Saturday 4 April with speakers from trades unions in North London and the South East and national officers from their union Unite. Camden Branch Chairs Phoebe Watkins and Barry Walden have sent a message of support from Camden UNISON and George Binette, Chair of Camden Trades Council, has done likewise. Kevin Nolan, the convenor was taken to the High Court on Monday 6 April.

Send messages of support to steve.hart@unitetheunion.com

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**Uniforms victory in temporary housing!**

As you may have heard, Hostels’ senior management had been seeking to impose the wearing of entirely inappropriate uniforms arbitrarily upon hostel’s Customer Services Officers, and UNISON members will be delighted to hear of another major victory achieved by your stewards. On 27 January we met with the Acting Director of Housing & Senior HR personnel and it was agreed that the current proposals be suspended and the whole question of uniforms/mode of dress be looked at again from scratch.

This follows a long campaign during which management refused to discuss the matter with us. A unanimous shop meeting motion backed a ballot for industrial action if attempts were made to impose uniforms. We then went into dispute through the Assistant Director and another meeting with Senior Management on 16 January failed to secure the necessary progress. With the valued assistance of the UNISON HASC Co-convenor and Assistant Branch Secretary we took the matter to Director level and our extremely significant victory was finally achieved.

Your UNISON stewards would like to congratulate all members on their solidarity and steadfastness throughout in the face of these unacceptable and dangerous proposals. It is clear what can be achieved if we all stick together!

Martin Cornish
Senior Hostels’ Steward
Branch annual meeting discusses battles past, some success and the struggles ahead

A packed AGM heard Branch Secretary David Eggenmore report that the branch continues to be in a healthy state financially, with surpluses both in the General Fund and the Defence Fund. David then gave the Annual Report.

Issues of pay, pensions and cuts continue to be in the forefront of UNISON activity. Over the past year our union has been involved and continues to represent and defend both services and individual members. This work will be seriously jeopardized if the Council’s proposed cut of £100,000 from Trade Union funding is implemented.

The quality of front line services continue to suffer as cuts are made under the auspices of the ‘Better and Cheaper’ initiative. The HR and Equality and diversity functions of the council are just two areas where the quality of service offered has worsened. The decision to freeze the Camden element of council tax for this year will mean a further cut of 2.5 per cent.

Councils are claiming they have to make cuts but financial reserves in councils across the country amount to £11 billion.

We were reminded of the success stories of our union during the course of the year. Camden UNISON has, as well, been involved in a number of broader campaigns: defending the NHS, working with local communities to stop BNP candidates winning council seats. The branch is involved in the ‘London Living Wage’ campaign which is a London wide initiative looking at getting employers to pay a minimum hourly wage of £7.45.

The two day strike action of 2008 in relation to our pay claim was well supported by Camden UNISON members.

The branch recruited 532 new members in 2008. Gwen Jones is now a full time worker in the branch office and the Camden UNISON Members Fund has been re-instated to offer small and medium sized loans to members in need.

Stewards and branch officers continue to work hard on members’ behalf.

Sadly, it was announced that Alan Walter, a committed trades unionist and a leading campaigning force in “Defend Camden Housing”, had died suddenly and unexpectedly that weekend.

There was warm recognition of Alan’s work and he will be greatly missed.

There was a clear sense of the struggles ahead of us as workers and trade union members.

Nationally UNISON will be pursuing this year’s pay claim, taking up the 1997 national agreement on equal pay and, of course, the continuing struggle against attacks on our pension rights.

Three motions were agreed. The first, moved by George Binette and passed unanimously by the meeting committed the Branch to mount a broad campaign against any further cuts and the attack on trade union facility time. The second, also passed without opposition, committed the branch to support the ‘Put People First March’ on the 28th of March around the issues of Jobs, Justice and Climate.

As the mover of the motion Pete Ainsley argued the continuing struggle against any further cuts and the attack on trade union facility time. The second, also passed without opposition, committed the branch to support the ‘Put People First March’ on the 28th of March around the issues of Jobs, Justice and Climate. As the mover of the motion Pete Ainsley argued the continuing struggle against attacks on our pension rights.

The meeting closed after the branch was recognised unanimously by the meeting.

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The NHS Mid-Life Life Check arrives in Camden

Camden UNISON is supporting Camden’s pilot of the NHS Mid-Life Life check. This is open to all staff regardless of age and it could help them identify changes that they may want to make to their lifestyle.

The check is an online tool developed by the Department of Health and they have asked Camden to trial it on its staff. It is an opportunity for us to input into a wider initiative that will be launched nationally.

There are a series of short questions to answer that will take about 10 minutes to complete. Once these questions are answered you will receive a traffic light rating, (red – take action, amber – consider changes, green – keep up the good work), on each of the following areas:

- Stop smoking
- Alcohol awareness
- Healthy eating
- Emotional wellbeing
- Physical exercise

You’ll also be offered an evaluation and advice on improvements you can make today which will make you healthier.

The pilot is running for three months and will close at the end of May.

Throughout the pilot there will be competitions and giveaways. Check out the Essentials web pages under ‘Wellness’ for details.

It’s free, completely confidential and will help you make the changes you want.

Complete the Mid-Life Life Check here: www.nhs.uk/midlifelifecheck

If you would like any further information please contact HR Advisor Nyla Ali: Telephone: (020 7974) 5236.

Sarah Friday
Camden UNISON Branch Health and Safety Officer
Women’s health fair a great success

That 150 women attended the UNISON lunchtime health fair at the Town Hall on Wednesday 25 March shows how much interest there is in women’s occupational safety and health issues. They all showed lots of interest in the many stalls and activities. There was a great atmosphere and the organic buffet was all eaten in the first half hour!

One of the most popular stalls was offering on-site acupressure massage and at the other end of the room Bunny Martin, a specialist in preventing back injuries at work, was doing body mapping exercises. As many of us are office based she was quickly flagging up that most of us were complaining of neck and arm problems relating to typing and computer work. Bunny was an absolute mine of information as to how to keep yourself safe at work with clear practical advice on how to reduce the risk of injury.

Other stalls included information on breast and cervical cancer screening, sickle cell anaemia, health and nutrition as well as a really practical stall on alcohol with props to show you just what exactly one unit of wine looks like (its much smaller than you think).

We organised the health fair, as we wanted to celebrate International Women’s Day by offering something really practical and useful to women. From the event we hope to recruit new members and safety reps (we will need these to help sort out all the safety and health issues raised at the fair) and see if there is interest in setting up a women’s committee.

If anyone is interested in standing as a safety representative, you get paid time off to do this and we will look after you and make sure you get the training you need to do it and all the support you could want.

We are open to ideas and suggestions from all you women out there. Did you think the event was good? Should we try to do more? What ideas do you have? Would you like to be involved in the Women’s Group? Or become a safety representative?

You can contact us via e-mail, or on the following numbers:
Maddy Cooper, Camden UNISON shop steward and safety rep: (7974) x 1213
Monica Morris – Jarra, Camden UNISON Equalities Officer: (7974) x 1833
Sarah Friday, Camden UNISON Health and Safety Officer: (7974) x 1635; mobile 07776374345

For most of our members the increase of 0.3% to last year’s pay settlement will amount to less than £7.5. But even this outraged Margaret Eaton, chair of the Local Government Association, who said: ‘The additional pay award defies common sense and will be a devastating blow to council workers, who will see jobs shed to balance the books’.

This final settlement for 2008-09 is less than half our original 6% claim and is a pay cut, whether measured against inflation early in 2008 or against the Consumer Price Index.

Proper negotiations have not even opened for 2009-10, though union negotiators have lodged a claim for ‘an increase of at least the level of retail price inflation, with additional salary increases for the lowest paid’. All the signs are that the employers will use the fear of job cuts to cow local government workers into accepting another substantial cut in their real pay.

In short, the message to UNISON members has to be: prepare to fight.

George Binette
Vice Chair

Living wage victory

After two years of campaigning staff and students at Birkbeck College have won a resounding victory when college governors agreed to pay the London Living wage to their mostly migrant cleaning and catering work force.

Workers for the private contractors involved, Ocean and Sodexho, will now be paid £7.45 per hour, a 35 percent increase from the national minimum wage of £5.73.

The campaign collected hundreds of signatures and held two successful protest rallies.
There’s strength in numbers:

JOIN CAMDEN UNISON

With over 3,500 members, Camden UNISON is the largest union in the council. If you are worried about your job in a re-structure, stressed by your workload, having trouble with your manager, worried about outsourcing, have health and safety concerns or are anxious that there is a decent pay settlement this year then you are better off in the union than without. Fight together with others — don’t struggle alone.

Phone the branch office on 020 7974 1633 or email the branch office manager: gwen.jones@camden.gov.uk
More information at: www.unison.org.uk

Camden Eye team
Editor: Pete Ainsley, Children, Schools & Families
Assistant Editor – Jonathan Marsh, Culture & Environment
Newsletter Team: Pete Ainsley, George Binette, Phil Lewis, Jonathan Marsh

Want to get involved? We need writers, cartoonists, photographers.
Email: peter.ainsley@camden.gov.uk

Copy date for next issue: 28 April 2009
The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily the views of Camden UNISON, but the branch will defend the right of members to express those views.

Marching for our future

Camden UNISON members were amongst the 35,000 strong demonstration for Jobs, Justice & Climate that took place at the end of March. Trades unions were there in large numbers with a mass of banners and particularly big contingents from UNISON, Unite and the RMT alongside colourful and stylish delegations from France, Belgium and Italy. Also present were environmental and anti poverty campaigners.

The march took place just before the G20 major industrial nations met to decide how to respond to the growing economic crisis. Marchers were demanding green jobs to deal with unemployment and help prevent climate change, no attacks on public services and an end to poverty. The mood was: the bankers have been bailed out, now it’s time to Put People First.