KILL THE LANSLEY BILL: March to defend the NHS against wholesale privatisation and fragmentation. Assemble 5.30 pm 17 May, University College London Hospital, Gower Street, WC1. March at 6.00 pm to Department of Health, Whitehall

A beginning, not the end

On 26 March many of us played a small part in making history as we took part along with more than 500,000 in the TUC’s ‘march for the alternative’. Camden UNISON branch officers have estimated that more than 250 members marched, with most of those joining the 2,000-strong feeder demonstration called by Camden United Against Cuts. Though the mainstream media focused on property damage and isolated clashes with police, the march was an enormous, vocal and vibrant outpouring of opposition to the Con-Dem coalition’s savage cuts programme.

The march showed the enduring potential of Britain’s trade unions, not least UNISON, as the demonstration brought together public and private sector workers, blue and white-collar workers, service providers and service users. It was also a living refutation of David Cameron’s attacks on multi-culturalism.

Of course, while many of us may have returned to work buoyed the following Monday, very little has yet changed on the ground. For many who took part in the 26 March protest, the questions are ‘where to next and how do we get there?’

Some answers came very soon after when some 700 Camden NUT members took strike action on 30 March against job cuts in central services at the very same time as NUT members in Tower Hamlets mounted action alongside UNISON members, culminating in a 1,500-strong march through the East London borough. Management are indicating that there could be up to 700 redundancies in the current financial year even as the first phase of the cuts eliminates some 270 full-time equivalent jobs. There is serious talk of extending the working week for most staff from 35 to 37 hours. This comes at a time when the vast majority of local government workers across Britain face a second consecutive real pay cut of between 4% and 5% and the Hutton review of public sector pensions calls for a rise of some 50% in our LGPS contributions.

In addition, corporate predators are sniffing around Camden’s library services. Transport services could well be split into three as a forerunner to privatisation. Camden Council undoubtedly does face a medium to long-term financial crisis, as long as the Con-Dem coalition controls local government’s purse strings and the Labour council chooses to live within this straitjacket. However, the reality remains that Camden is still not flat broke. The borough is getting more than £1.767 million in each of the next three years from the so-called new homes bonus. Also, there is an under-spend from the past financial year estimated at £6 million on top of reserves not yet earmarked of more than £1.12 million.

With this in mind there is all the more reason to continue campaigning, whether in alliances with service users or through industrial action. The branch leadership intends to build on the indicative ballot’s 68% ‘yes’ vote for strike action in opposition to compulsory redundancies, albeit on a low turnout, and push for an official strike vote.

Nationally there are mounting signs that pensions could be the issue that sparks co-ordinated industrial action across union divides. The 250,000 member PCS civil service union along with the UCU lecturers’ union is already committed to a joint strike on Thursday 30 June in opposition to the attacks on public sector schemes with a very real possibility that the NUT and other teaching unions will join in. Unfortunately, UNISON is not yet among those committed to taking action.

Your branch delegates to the union’s local government and national delegate conferences this June will be pushing hard for UNISON to be joining the ranks of those taking action sooner rather than later.

Meanwhile, given the scale of the challenges we face locally the branch needs a membership that is active, informed and committed like never before.

George Binette
Branch Secretary
Hidden Camden

Mental health problems are at their worst in central London and near the top of the central London league of unhappiness is Camden. Tony Creedon voices his concern on further cutbacks in care.

The national mental health statistics are frightening. Countrywide one person in four will suffer a mental health problem during their lives and one in six do so at any one time. With 23 million prescriptions for anti-depressants written last year and with a third of all GP appointments being mental health related, the total cost to the exchequer of our collective misery is estimated to be in the region of £105 billion.

Since the mid 1950’s when the numbers being taken into hospitals began to decrease mental health services have been changing as ideas about distress develop. What makes the current situation so worrying is that what is shaping change now isn’t progressive reform but simply money. The government’s recent headline initiative talks of investing ‘around £400 million’ extra money into mental health but the reality is that deep cuts are taking place in services vulnerable people depend on.

The Camden & Islington NHS Trust – a body facing real financial pressures - is continuing to reduce the number of mental health hospital beds yet at the same time critically needed community based services are diminishing rather than strengthening.

GREATLY influenced by the economics of care and the need to make savings there are huge re-organisations going on with the Community Mental Health Teams. Along with these there will be no continuance of the Work Solutions Service based at St James’ House beyond March and crucially the borough’s savings strategy envisages cutting by a third the money spent on critically important mental health day services. There have been cuts in the much needed housing support services and finally and perhaps most shamefully of all, with few exceptions the Freedom Pass is to be ended for those with mental health problems.

If fewer people are to be admitted to psychiatric hospital, a goal we can all subscribe to, a decent and humane society then requires good and relevant community facilities not their continuing reduction. People with mental health struggles are people who are stigmatised, whom are pushed to the margins of life and who don’t have a voice. They depend on their struggle being seen and understood. Our role as a union branch is to see and understand these issues and to realise that they are absolutely integral to the struggles to come and to the building of the better tomorrow we all deserve.

There was a large lively picket at South Camden Community School (SCCS) when Camden NUT struck on 30 March. Camden UNISON members at the school supported the picket until they had to start work. The picket received delegations and support from Camden UNISON, PCS, RMT and UCL UCU. A delegation from the UNITE union’s national executive stopped by on their way to a meeting to give solidarity greetings. The pickets joined the 500 strong march from Crowndale to the Town Hall. George Binette, Camden UNISON Branch Secretary, was one of the speakers at the following rally at NUT headquarters.
Lord Young’s prescription of a ‘common sense’ approach to health and safety is leading to cutbacks in enforcement and a less safe environment for all of us argues Sarah Friday, branch health and safety officer.

Dangerous nonsense

Workplace health and safety is set to suffer as a result of the Coalition Government cuts that includes a 35% reduction to the budget of the health and safety watchdog the HSE (Health and Safety Executive). Local authority health and safety enforcers, EHOs (Environmental Health Officers) are also being cut due to the slashing of local authority budgets. Lord Young’s report into the ‘compensation culture’ argues for a ‘common sense’ approach to health and safety is leading to cutbacks in enforcement and deregulation of safety legislation.

How will this affect us in Camden?

Camden’s Regulatory Services team (which includes EHO’s and technical officers) is being cut by nearly 50% from around 100 to just over 50. This will mean fewer inspections of Camden’s shops and restaurants, fewer noise patrols and pest visits and the rapid response service could go. So we can expect a dirtier, less hygienic and smellier future and rogue employers can relax knowing their business is highly unlikely to ever receive a visit from a health and safety inspector.

Camden UNISON members working in offices and schools face having their health and safety at work issues overlooked as Lord Young’s report categorises these workplaces as ‘low hazard’ - this at a time when stress and musculo-skeletal injuries are at record levels. The HSE will be replacing the need for risk assessments in these workplaces with a safety ‘checklist’.

The requirement for written home working risk assessments will go. Camden Council’s Safety Management System already reflects this categorisation of offices as ‘low risk’.

Camden UNISON argues that this ignores risks such as RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury) and stress that over the long term can cause chronic health problems. It is also potentially discriminatory as women are more likely to work in these occupations than men, who work in higher numbers in jobs that pose more immediate risks to their health and are therefore classified as ‘high risk’.

As trade unionists we need to argue for a concerted campaign to halt these attacks on our workplace health and safety rights.

Go to: ‘Is HSE finished?’ http://www.hazard.org/votetodie/ishfinished.htm

Campaign for a million climate jobs

We face an economic crisis and an environmental crisis in Britain and across the world. We need solutions to both beginning now. Climate activists, and several national trade unions, are launching a campaign to make the government create one million green climate jobs. We have produced a pamphlet that explains how we can do that and why we must. To find solutions to the climate crisis and the recession, we need more public spending, the opposite of current government policy. We have people who need jobs and work that needs to be done. A million climate jobs in the UK will not solve all the economy’s problems. But it will take a million human beings off the dole and put them to work saving the future.

More at: http://www.climate-change-jobs.org/
saving netherwood

in january camden council announced to carers that netherwood, a resource in kilburn for people with alzheimer’s and other dementia, would close on 1 july. white-hot with rage jane clinton (pictured left, above) decided to channel her anger and began the save netherwood day centre campaign.

the campaign gained momentum and lots of signatures including those of baroness helena kennedy, eric hobsbwam, toni parsons, benedict cumberbatch and ricky gervais.

we were able to get front page stories in the cnj, the kilburn times and had coverage in the evening standard, the ham and high as well as a slot in tvt london tonight and lbc radio.

freedom of information requests were lodged to get answers to the questions that were regularly swerved in meetings.

we attended carers’ meetings, consultation meetings, council scrutiny committee and cabinet meetings.

there were emails and letters to councillors and mps. we attended surgeries, we tweeted, we emailed, we facebooked.

we assembled with 2000 others from camden in lincolns inn fields on 26 march to join the tuc march for an alternative.

our aim was always to get the story out there: let people know and get people on our side.

four thousand signatures later and with increasing public support for our campaign, the council announced on 29 march that it was withdrawing its proposal to close netherwood.

it has had a reprieve for two to three years by which time, the council said, a new purpose-built centre is planned in kentish town.

those weekends pounding the streets and all those sleepless nights were worth it.

my advice for fellow campaigners? don’t do it alone: surround yourself with a core of supportive, reliable people and secondly, never ever give up.
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Along with many other sections in the council, Camden’s library service is facing a drastic cut in funding, £8m down to £6m by 2014.

Over 27 posts have already gone from the service in the past few years following two reviews, with the consequent loss of expertise and literally hundreds of years experience. The so called ‘back-room’ work still has to be done, and has either been outsourced or fallen on remaining front-line staff.

The council has just concluded a public consultation about how to make the remaining £1.6m ‘savings’. Options range from scrapping Swiss Cottage, the central library; shutting two large libraries; closing all three medium or all five small libraries; or reducing opening hours by 40%.

At an extraordinary council meeting on 27 April called by the Lib Dems, they put a motion that none of Camden’s 13 libraries should close (although no pledge to reject privatisation). This was defeated in favour of a heavily amended version from the Labour group re-iterating their position. (A UNISON delegation had argued against closures, against privatisation, against setting one service against another and arguing the benefits of a public library service.) So, following the results of the consultation, the proposals will be put as planned to the Cabinet meeting on 8 June.

As the consultation stands, library users had no choice but to endorse one or other of the council’s proposals. We have no way of knowing how (or even if) comments on the survey forms rejecting the proposals will be collated. UNISON has drawn up a petition to give the public the opportunity they were not afforded in the consultation, to just say ‘no’ to library cuts.

UNISON members are also gravely concerned that the widespread use of volunteers was peddled in the survey as a serious viable option without outlining what saving, if any, this would produce, and with no details of how such a scheme could operate in terms of recruiting, vetting, training, organising, retention and accountability. It won’t come cheap, and in what other council or public service would the wholesale use of volunteers be acceptable? Not only is the use of volunteers an attack on our members’ jobs but would lead to deterioration in the quality of service.

Libraries are not only vital in supporting literacy and learning, providing information and on-line access, but are the hub of our communities. The loss of local library services would inevitably lead to a reduction in community cohesion and an increase in individual isolation. This in turn would impact on other already overstretched and threatened voluntary and public services. The social cost with all its financial consequences will far outstrip any savings made to the library service. In order to maintain and protect libraries’ unique role, we must resist reductions and continue to fight for public services run by paid staff.

Already 4400 signatures have been submitted to the council, but there is still time to add your voice before 8 June. Please sign and promote the petition. The on line version is on www.petition.co.uk/save-camden-libraries or you can get copies from UNISON Branch office.

Library Stewards

The writer Alan Gibbons has initiated the ‘Campaign for the Book’. Go to http://alangibbons.net for information on campaigns against library closures and the private companies wanting to take over.

Fair Pay for Royal Cleaners

The PCS union branch for Royal Households is demanding the London Living Wage of £7.85 for the 20 or so cleaners who are on £6.45 an hour. The royal family get £30 million a year for the upkeep of the Royal Household. Sign the petition at: www.pcs.org.uk/royalcleaners

Camden United Against Cuts was set up as an umbrella organisation to help co-ordinate resistance to the cuts in Camden. Go to the website: camdenunited.org.uk for details of meetings and activities.

Several thousand trades unionists joined the May Day march from Clerkenwell Green to Trafalgar Square. There were strong Turkish and Sri Lankan contingents. Also amongst those marching were restaurant and domestic workers demanding pay justice (pictured).
The topic of pensions is one that many people find difficult to follow and don’t pay much attention to. However, it is very important as they will form the bulk of our income when we retire from employment and a good pension is key for dignity and comfort in retirement. Vinothan Sangarapillai, Deputy Observer on the Council’s Pensions Sub Committee, on the current government assault on pensions

Pensions: prepare for a fight

The idea of changes to public sector pensions has been in the news over the last few months, as the Hutton report into public sector pensions has been published. The Government have also taken the decision to change the measure of inflation that public sector occupational pensions are uprated by from the Retail Price Index (RPI) to the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The CPI tends to be lower than the RPI (at the moment it’s 4% compared to an RPI of 5.3%), so retired civil servants, local government workers and others who worked for public authorities will be getting smaller annual pension increases than they would do otherwise.

The Government have also announced that the contributions that employees have to pay towards their pensions will go up by around 3% (depending on people’s pay band) from 2012 to 2015. This will be a sizeable blow to people’s take-home pay – at a time when a pay freeze has been imposed on those of us who work in the public sector. These sharp rises have the danger of provoking people to opt out of the scheme and, in the long-run, this will be bad for the Government as they will have to pay out means-tested benefits to those pensioners who don’t get an employer’s pension. There is a myth among some journalists, commentators and right-wing lobbyists that public-sector pensions are very generous (‘gold-plated’). You can challenge this myth when you hear it – as, in reality, as the Hutton report admits - the average occupational pension paid to retired public sector workers is £7800 per year. The average is pushed up by the higher pensions payable to those who were on a high grade when they retired and by those who have served the maximum 40 years – and therefore half of pensioners in our schemes actually get less than £5600 per year.

Why the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is not fit for purpose for indexing pension benefits: go to http://unison.org.uk/acrobat/DWP/ConIndexConsultation.pdf

Historically CPI is on average 0.7% per annum less than RPI.

- The Office for Budget Responsibility has predicted that pension values will in effect be 8.5% less by 2017 if increased by CPI.

- Lord Hutton in his Interim Report of 7 October 2010 stated that public service pension benefit values will be cut by 15% in adopting full CPI indexation.

The real ‘pensions problem’ is not the modest pensions that go to retired public sector workers on junior grades but the fact that many private sector employers are too stingy to provide their staff with proper pensions’ provision.

The trade unions are doing their best to fight to defend our pension rights. The National Union of Teachers is considering taking industrial action about the shift to CPI for pension rises. UNISON may ballot for industrial action on this and on the proposed steep rises in employee contributions. We need to stand together to defend the principle of a decent pension for retirement.

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The latest campaign is to make the top 100 FTSE companies and specifically retail companies adopt the LLW. Tesco’s is the top target. Seven-year old Lucas spoke about telling Tesco’s Chief Executive that ‘no one should have to do a day’s work for less than they can live on’. Tesco made £3.4 billion profits in the year up to February. Campaigners will be out in force at the Tesco Annual General Meeting this month urging the Chief Executive to pay the LLW.

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Tesco’s is top living wage target

May 2 marked the 10th anniversary of the campaign for a London Living Wage (LLW). Whipp’s Cross Hospital cleaners and others won the Living Wage in 2006. The next year saw 8 successful campaigns. Now KPMG, Goldman Sachs, HSBC, Barclays pay the LLW. Lush – the cosmetic retailer – is committed to the LLW. Phoebe Watkins, Branch Co-Chair, reports from the celebration meeting.

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- More about the campaign at: www.citizensuk.org

- London Mayor Boris Johnson recognises that paying a living wage makes financial sense with employees staying longer, having less sickness and being more committed. Camden UNISON has been pushing Camden Council to pay not only its own directly employed staff at least the LLW, but also ensure that all privatised contracts have this rate as a minimum.
Following a reorganisation experienced, qualified staff face redundancy while posts have been left empty. Adejare Oyewole Joint Equalities Officer, on a disturbing development

Neither fair nor transparent

Last year, management announced that they had to save £1m from the employees’ budget in our section (Repairs & Improvements). We were told that they expected to save £250,000 in the first phase (albeit at a cost of around £500,000 to achieve this goal) and £750,000 in the second phase. Throughout the process, UNISON representatives attended consultation meetings. Management and HR (Human Resources) refused to take minutes of consultation meetings contrary to government good practice guidelines.

Now it happens that assurances given at the meetings have been denied and members are being denied their rights that managers in scope in the first phase were able to exercise. Management have also denied members the right to see the assessments that are supposed to have been the basis for deciding whether or not they have a job.

Camden’s policy for reorganisations states that any selection process should be ‘fair and transparent’, and should attempt to minimise redundancies, but we strongly feel that neither of these principles has applied in this reorganisation.

Posts that clearly could have been filled by experienced, qualified staff have been left empty. UNISON believe that management assessments have either been unfair or been based on inadequate evidence, and many more people are currently at risk of redundancy as a result. The cost of redundancy payments to long-serving, capable staff, then recruiting and training new ones is likely to exceed the expected savings from what appears to a woefully managed process. We believe that they are hoping to set a precedent with this and carry out future reorganisations in a similar manner.

Directorate’s management have refused to recognise the declaration of a dispute on this matter. Following many shop meetings held in the section, members overwhelmingly agreed that the branch should carry out an indicative ballot of members in scope within the section to measure support for industrial action, including strike action with the aim of persuading management to halt the current reorganisation and carry out a fair selection process. The branch has recorded a 75.4% turnout in the ballot with 91.3% voting ‘yes’. UNISON has shown how to effectively listen and represent the view of its members where others have failed to show any concern. In the Equalities Impact Assessment of 7 April 2011 management stated of the mitigating actions taken ‘there was an emphasis on not focussing on specific qualification requirements in role profiles to reduce the adverse impact on minority groups who are less likely to have certain qualifications.’

UNISON has challenged this statement, which reflects stereotypical assumptions about minority staff, and awaits management’s response.

Play: still time to change proposals

Late in November 2010 the council announced its cuts programme which included the planned decimation of the Play Service - a 65% cut overall with what ever services remaining being in the voluntary sector. Under the proposals about 100 playworker jobs are threatened and parents will be left with no childcare after school and during the school holidays.

Within a week UNISON had built a campaign involving parents, playworkers and voluntary sector organisations resulting in 500 people lobbying the council on 1st December. The campaign went from strength to strength, lobbying individual councillors, meeting senior officers and turning Bidborough Street into a play street when the council met in February.

The cuts do not take affect until 2012 so there is still time to change these proposals.

Barry Walden
Branch Chair (Job-Share)