

● Prepare for Autumn fight as offer rejected – see below!

Newsletter of the Camden Unison Branch

CAMDEN EYE



Number 02 ● September 2007

Housing management are pushing their plans for a rent collection call centre and further privatisation. **Mandy Berger**, co-convenor HASC, explains why we will campaign against them

Defend council housing

Senior Housing managers have revealed cross-cutting proposals for what they call the 'Housing Management Improvement Plan' (HMIP).

The proposals are to transfer district housing offices, where services are offered in a local setting, to a faceless 'rent collection call centre'. This decision has been taken even though the current 'repairs centre' has been seen as a disaster.

It is possible that vulnerable people will be dealt with inappropriately and Camden will face another wave of criticism when predicted problems become reality.

If this reckless plan goes ahead it could result in Camden losing many experienced and committed staff. Management have simply failed to realise what the rest of us already know: the majority of people want one person to contact for all their tenancy issues. These proposals would see one person to contact for repairs, another for voids and yet another for rent collection: how can this be a 'better' part of the 'better and cheaper programme'?

Another threat coming out of HMIP is management's continued push for either full or partial privatisation of estate-based caretaking and cleaning services, and the elimination of rent-free accommodation for resident caretakers.

We campaigned hard against past attacks and I am confident we can resist these new attacks. The success of Defend Council Housing has shown nationally that the potential exists to win a bright future for directly owned and managed council housing.

Reject

After the fantastic vote by Camden tenants to reject the ALMO we believe New Labour is feeling the pressure and will finally agree the fourth option.

The new government has already conceded the idea of allowing councils to build their own homes and this has come after years of both the Tory and New Labour governments preventing this from happening, a major factor in fuelling the crisis of affordable housing.

● For more information on the Defend Council Housing Campaign go to: www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk



Retired members support Defend Council Housing. Photo: David Jones

Pay fight hots up

UNISON's national negotiating team met on 4 September to consider the latest revised pay offer from the local government employers of just below 2.5%. For all of us this is still a cut in real pay of nearly 1.5% at time when transport and housing costs continue to outstrip the headline inflation rate and mortgage interest rates look likely to rise.

UNISON rejected this latest offer and have instead voted overwhelmingly to authorise a national strike ballot for UNISON members in local authorities across England, Wales and the north of Ireland. A timetable for the ballot should be announced shortly, but if there is a 'yes' vote industrial action could begin in early November.

The latest development reflects the extent of local government workers' discontent over pay. Here in Camden UNISON

members had voted decisively to reject the employers' original 2% offer. In July 83.3% of members voted against the offer. This result was echoed nationally, where 81% said 'no'.

Over 1,250 members voted locally, nearly 43% of those covered by the dispute. This was by far the highest turnout in any London borough.

Prior to the employers' revised offer, the union's national representatives had agreed that any campaign should start with a minimum of two days of strike action. It's clear that the one-day strikes, we've seen in many previous UNISON campaigns, are not adequate.

Our course is quite clear. If we want anything like a decent pay rise this year, we must be committed to vote for and take effective strike action.

David Eggmore
Branch Secretary

VICTORY OVER NO-COVER STAND

Earlier this year management wanted to hold posts vacant when they arose. This would amount to one post per district as a way of implementing cuts.

In Kentish Town DHO we were told that the post to be held vacant was an Estate Officer. We were told that we were expected to cover this patch of 690 council homes.

We held a shop meeting and decided that there was no way we could take on any extra work with our stressful workloads, and we know that UNISON has a national policy of supporting members who refuse to cover for vacant posts.

We held firm – united in our position against pressure from management and they backed down and agreed to recruit to the post.

All the Estate Officers here were very pleased that they had taken such a reasonable and confident stand and that they had won!

Mandy Berger

Shop Steward Kentish Town DHO

NEED HELP ON HEALTH & SAFETY?

Should you have any health and safety concerns at your workplace speak to your local UNISON safety representative. If you do not have a safety rep contact Sarah Friday, Camden UNISON branch Health and Safety Officer on ext 1633, email sarah.friday@camden.gov.uk

Sarah can offer advice on your health and safety concerns and come into your workplace to carry out a safety inspection if necessary

George Binette and Sarah Friday report on the Council's privatised cleaning service and find that 'where there's muck there's brass'.

Contract cleaning: an all-MITIE mess

In the late 1980s the Thatcher government pushed Compulsory Competitive Tendering creating a huge market within the public sector for companies advertising cleaning and other ancillary services. One of the biggest players to emerge has been MITIE (Management Incentive Through Investment Equity), formed in 1987 and now boasting some 45,000 employees in operations across Britain.

MITIE's gross profits rose by 12 per cent over the past year, with revenue up by 31 per cent to nearly £1.3 billion. The BBC, Department of Work and Pensions, JP Morgan Bank and even the Houses of Parliament figure among the company's 6,000 contracts. In September 2006 MITIE became the main cleaning and support services contractor in Camden Council, covering both Council buildings and LEA schools.

So how is MITIE measuring up? By its own key standard, the answer is 'not very well'. Management claims to be suffering a loss due to inadequate information supplied by the previous contractor regarding total hours worked.

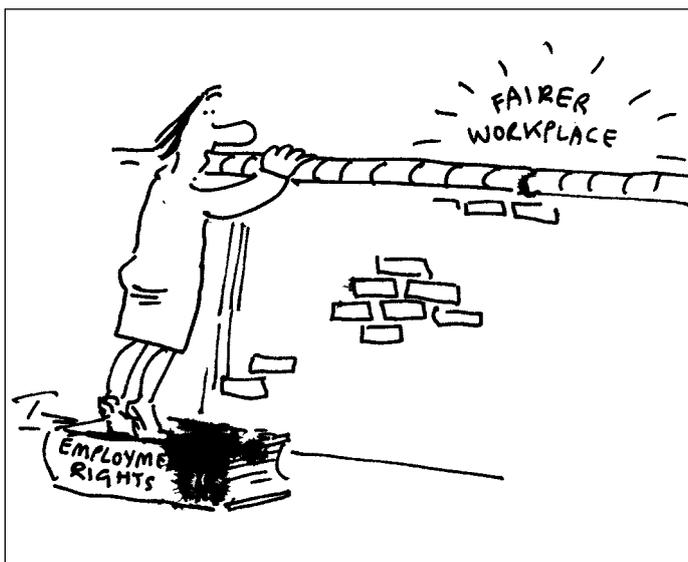
But, more importantly, how have workers fared under the new regime? The most serious incident that has come to UNISON's attention involved a MITIE employee assigned to clean a men's lavatory long identified as a haunt of

IV drug users. Supplied only with latex gloves the worker pricked a finger on a bloodied hypodermic needle, discarded amid heaps of toilet roll. MITIE's own report of the incident suggests that it had not previously conducted a risk assessment for needle stick injuries in an inner London authority, despite Camden being the site of four major drugs markets.

The employee had to

received frequent reports of underpayment of wages and the withholding of holiday pay.

Now more than ever 'where there's muck there's brass' along with chronically low pay, hazardous working conditions and the denial of employment rights. To tackle the issues there needs to be increased union membership and serious workplace organisation among the cleaners and other staff.



take several weeks off work and quit another cleaning job as he underwent a course of preventative therapy with powerful antiviral medicines.

As with many other players in this sector, MITIE pays most of its Camden-based employees the minimum wage, with most workers currently receiving just 12 days paid holiday and sick pay only after the third day of sickness absence. UNISON representatives have also

Know Your Rights: from 1 October the national minimum wage, goes up by 17p to £5.52 an hour. Also in October the number of paid holidays for workers in this country will rise to 24 days. By April 2009 all workers in Britain should be entitled to 28 days of paid annual leave – that means at least 20 days on top of the eight Bank Holidays. This change will mean a lot to the employees of MITIE and other cleaning contractors.

Cartoon:
Tim Sanders

Should school support staff have a separate negotiating structure? Branch Vice Chair, **Barry Walden**, reports on a closely argued debate at UNISON Conference

In a class of their own?

In the discussion at UNISON Local Government Conference on the proposal to develop a national pay and conditions framework for school support staff I found myself changing my mind as the discussion continued.

The argument for agreeing a national framework is that at present there are workers across the country doing the same job without consistent pay rates and terms and conditions. While trade unions at local level can negotiate with local au-

thorities the outcome is not binding on the schools, in fact 35% of schools are self governing with staff employed directly by the school.

The argument against is that at present school support staff are represented through the National Joint Council (NJC) agreement for local government, and this unites school support workers with the rest of us employed by councils.

During the pensions strike school support workers were among the most militant, ensuring

up and down the country that schools were closed. This kind of action is required now to shift Gordon Brown away from the government imposed 2% pay limit.

Separating the two groups will effectively make both weaker with local authority pay claims being implemented from April and school support staff implemented from September.

A close final vote was in favour of moving towards a separate framework although Camden's delegation voted against.

How do you deal with bullying managers? **John Mann**, co-convenor for Culture & Environment, draws lessons from a successful Employment Tribunal against Camden

Bullying at work and how to fight it

In recent years the council has made many pronouncements about bullying and has even introduced the *Dignity at Work Policy* which was primarily aimed at reducing bullying behaviour by managers. Yet within Culture and Environment there is evidence of an approach to management that encourages 'robust' behaviour that can lead to bullying.

Whilst the best response to such tactics is always joint action by union members within each workplace, the bully will often try to isolate individuals and use them as an example to others in order to intimidate the rest of the team.

A classic example of

this approach was experienced by a young man in the Parking Solutions Service last year and has recently resulted in a successful Employment Tribunal (ET) case.

First employed as a temp he was seen as a model employee but when he started questioning some management actions he quickly fell from favour and was targeted by several managers in his section. His promised assimilation was blocked, he was the subject of rumours, was turned down for training and promotion, had leave refused and was then hit with a grievance from two senior managers who claimed he had bullied them.

With union support he stood up to this for over

a year but eventually he felt unable to continue and resigned. The ET case was his chance to get Camden to answer for the behaviour of its managers, and after two weeks in court, with his mother representing him, his claim for Constructive Dismissal was upheld.

This is unlikely to be the only ET case brought by staff in C&E, and we encourage anybody who has experienced similar behaviour it to seek UNISON support. However we would prefer to deal with this type of management by increasing membership and improving union organisation within the department. The best way to stop bullying is by collective action.

EYE VIEW

The market cannot deliver housing for all

● For thirty years successive governments have attacked council housing. It has been starved of funding, plundered by 'Right to buy' and seen new build reduced from 200,000 homes a year to almost zero. Everyone was urged to become a home owner. Financial rules were relaxed to allow for an increase in mortgage selling. We can now see the result. The increase in house purchase lending to nearly £1 trillion a year has fuelled an enormous increase in house prices. Home ownership, with many borrowing six times their salary now often means desperate insecurity with worries about either a price crash or a rates increase.

It's an old truth that bears repeating: the free market has never been able to provide decent housing for everyone at a price they can afford. Council housing offers an alternative to the market. We must defend it against the privatisers.

The money is there

● There is money for war, for Trident nuclear weapons and national identity cards. There is money for City bonuses totalling a record £14bn. But apparently there is not the money there for decent public sector pay. The national negotiators were right to reject the employers near 2.5% offer. The government is opposed to a reasonable pay settlement. A strike has to be our answer. The government were shocked at the size and solidarity of the national one day strike on pensions. Let's give them a bigger shock this time.

Peter Ainsley
Editor

There's strength in numbers:

JOIN CAMDEN UNISON

With over 3,000 members Camden UNISON is the largest union on the council. If you are worried about your job in a re-structure, stressed by your workload, having trouble with your manager, worried about out-sourcing, 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.

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

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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.



Mental health services face severe cuts. **Tony Creedon**, who has worked in mental health for over thirty years, voices his concerns.

A QUIET CRISIS

A recent Greater London Assembly report * argues that levels of mental health need and levels of deprivation are 'strongly linked' and concludes that the cost of London's mental health problems is around £5bn a year and that 18% of all Londoners have a mental health problem. Camden and Islington have some of the capital's highest mental health needs.

Every London mental health trust reported a budgetary surplus in 2005/06. But like many other trusts Camden and Islington now faces huge financial pressures and is required to make £8m savings over the next three years. Cuts in the money the Trust receives

from both Camden and Islington councils and the Primary Care Trust (PCT) have placed it in an impossible position. The requirement to modernise and develop services while making stringent cuts has led to an unprecedented period of upheaval in already overstretched services.

There have already been major cuts. The Jamestown day centre has been closed and its building sold to property developers for £1.9m. The three psychiatric day hospitals are being converted into two recovery centres with the total number of places for service users being reduced from 85 to 65. The Community Mental Health Teams are be-

ing reduced from eight to six and the specialist Focus team that works in the south of the two boroughs is facing a 40% cut.

The number of Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit beds is being cut and the specialist 'Morrington Unit' faces possible closure. Consultation is starting on plans to close the Tottenham Mews walk in centre...The list goes on.

Be under no illusions: mental health services really do matter. Our own mental health and social care trust is caught between NHS cuts being enacted through the PCT and local authority cuts. Already the price being paid by the vulnerable is very real.

* <http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/reports/health/mentalhealth.pdf>

Reinstate Karen Reissman, defend union rights



Jane Lee (pictured), an occupational therapist and striking member of

Manchester Social Care and Mental Health Trust UNISON branch spoke at a hastily convened UNISON meeting.

Jane outlined the attack by Trust management, who had suspended on absurd charges, her branch chair, Karen Reissman. Karen is well known nationally for defending NHS pay and conditions, and fighting privatisation. In response more than 87% of her UNISON branch members voted 'yes' in an official strike ballot to demand her re-instatement. Some 700 staff struck

from 29-31 August and in the absence of any movement by Trust management another three day strike was set for 12-14 September.

Support for Karen has flooded in from around the North West and across the country.

Shamefully, rather than negotiate proper emergency cover, Trust management moved patients on three psychiatric wards to private hospitals miles away. This caused the patients and their relatives tremendous anxiety.

The local press condemned management rather than

the strikers!

Camden UNISON vice-chair, Barry Walden, pledged an immediate £100 and said he was sure the branch committee would make a further donation and send a delegation to the Manchester rally on 9 September in support of Karen.

More information and how to support the dispute at: www.reinstate-karen.org

Below: Manchester strikers picket their Trust's HQ



Caroline Bedale