

VICTORY TO ST. MUNGO'S STRIKERS

Workers at homelessness charity St Mungo's Broadway (SMB) have voted to take a further ten days strike following their recent, rock solid, seven day strike. A well-attended members meeting took the decision and was addressed by Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey, who pledged full support for the strikers. The meeting heard reports that membership had increased by over 250 members during the strike and elected extra union reps.

The strike was marked by high levels of involvement with hundreds of strikers attending rallies, two protests per day, and nineteen picket lines. Solidarity messages, donations to the hardship fund and invitations for strikers to speak are coming in and the mood is ever more confident. Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn has tabled a supporting Early Day Motion in Parliament and local authorities, who purchase services from St Mungo's Broadway, have announced that they will review their relationship with the organisation; Islington have asked management what plans they have to cut senior staff pay!

None of this has come out of the blue but has been prepared by a serious union campaign of informing the members that management attacks were likely and preparing them for the campaign that would be necessary to resist. Membership was already over 350 in SMB prior to this struggle, with regular reps and members meetings, site visits and organising campaigns.

The retiring St Mungo's Chief Executive was given a £160,000 'pay off' in addition to his salary of over £116,000 and the new boss has taken a £30,000 rise. Management are refusing to answer questions about other executive pay increases but it seems clear that the saving from pay cuts announced are outweighed by pay increases



at the top and 'pay offs'. As Unite convenor Adam Lambert has pointed out "this is clearly an outrageous transfer of income from the lowest paid to the highest paid."

But Unite members understand the significance of the management approach for the future. The changes were imposed with less than twenty four hours' notice and management have stated they no longer intend to negotiate with the union on pay but will impose what they calculate as the 'median'. Members see pay negotiation as a key function of their union and it is clear that the plan is for drastic pay cuts in future having broken their unions ability to resist. Negotiators have been clear that they would talk about the employer's ability to pay in negotiations – but the employer has simply announced that they will no longer negotiate on pay. St Mungo's Broadway's convenor Adam Lambert noted that the union did want to talk about how to harmonise the T&C's/pay for all workers noting it was necessary but that the imposition was a key issue.

While cuts do make the 'business environment' difficult St Mungo's Broadway has continued to win contracts on the basis of quality budgeting on existing rates of pay. The

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new executive is set on a very different model which would inevitably undermine the services for some of the most vulnerable in society, services that staff are deeply committed to delivering. The new CEO, Howard Sinclair, has repeatedly raised the 'exciting' prospect of working with large private contractors such as the scandal hit 'Serco'. He invited a Serco executive to speak to a Broadway staff conference months before the merger. Staff were shocked by his flippant jokes about 'Doncatraz' - a reference to the prison in Doncaster run by Serco. St Mungo's Broadway is overseen by a non-executive board whose members 'expertise' is mainly in business, property and finance rather than homelessness.

Take Sir Leigh Lewis KCB, he is a retired senior servant and current member of Serco's 'Advisory Council'. In his role as Permanent Secretary at the DWP he defended the use of private contractors replacing Job Centre Plus to the Public Accounts Committee in Parliament. He was reported as 'floundering' when he had to admit that Job Centre Plus was in fact 'very effective and able'. For him it was clearly a natural move to work with Serco. People working to make a difference for homeless people see things very differently. So far no board member has been willing to talk to staff representatives about the dispute despite a recent staff lobby of a board meeting. The previous negotiations at ACAS were called by Unite and management actually protested about the fact that Unite had approached ACAS. In eleven and a half hours they made no offer; they made no serious attempt to avoid the strike.

When Len McCluskey spoke to strikers he emphasised the vital importance of the strike not only for both current and future workers and the clients at St Mungo's Broadway, but for all involved in the supported housing and social care sector. He pledged the full support of Unite, "in every way possible" for what he called, "a pivotal dispute that is really about respect; respect for vulnerable people and the workers that care for them."

Other workers in the sector are following the dispute particularly keenly as they feel they have been trampled on by their boss's competitive race to the bottom. Concern has been expressed by some managements in the sector that they are cutting each other's throats by competing on price and driving down wages and standards. Unite has called on responsible employers to talk about a national agreement that would take wages out of competition by setting rates for the job, and could serve as a guarantee of standards in the

sector. Unite LE1111 branch secretary and Socialist Party member, Suzanne Muna commented, "Unite has such an agreement with employers in Scotland; if they care about services for vulnerable people why not talk to Unite in England and Wales?" Suzanne has initiated the call for 'Sector Standards' as a housing and social care JIB so there would be the development of national terms and conditions in the sector.

The London based Unite housing branch LE1111, in which Socialist Party members play a leading role, has had a number of disputes (in Equinox, One Housing Group, Peabody and HCA) recently in which workers have fought back against management attacks on pay and conditions. This reflects a conscious attempt to support union reps in the branch in organising and mobilising. Workers in the sector feel increasingly desperate as their living standards are squeezed, management becomes increasingly hard line and they see services for some of the worst hit victims of the crisis undermined. When convinced that their reps are determined and supported by their union, there is a mood to fight to the end. This is a struggle that can be won. Last year, Unite members at the St Mungo's Hitchin project were successful with sustained industrial action.

This mood is also reflected in the recent victorious strikes in Greenwich libraries (members of another Unite branch where Socialist Party members play a leading role) and at the Ritzy cinema, as well as in the ongoing fire-fighters dispute. They demonstrate the potential for coordinated action if a national lead was given. In the HCA dispute, where Suzanne Muna is the senior Unite steward, strike action was co-ordinated with the PCS over 2 years, linking the campaigns against cuts and for fair pay with the austerity measures and co-ordinated action as the key industrial strategy that could defeat cuts.

The issues at stake in the St Mungo's dispute will resonate with workers across the country. It is important that the issues are raised with workers and that support is mobilised for the strikers. Strikers should be invited to speak at meetings, solidarity greetings sent and collections taken. To help the union's solidarity appeal, the National Shop Stewards Network is asking its supporters to organise collections, donations & speakers at meetings. The NSSN will work in conjunction with a new support group set up by Unite.

For more info on the strike contact SMBunite@gmail.com

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