

EQUAL PAY

By Emma Phillips, Regional Organiser

Public services in this country have been built on the backs of a skilled and dedicated, and predominantly female workforce - a workforce traditionally undervalued. The law on Equal Pay states that if people who have different jobs of the same value should be paid the same amount of money. UNISON does not believe the current pay system in Aberdeenshire Council complies with the law. This is one of the main reasons we are talking about changing the pay systems in our Single Status talks.

A major example of pay unfairness is that male manual worker jobs get a bonus payment and traditionally female manual and APT&C jobs do not get access to a bonus payment. UNISON members with valid equal pay claims have the right to take their case to an employment tribunal. If successful with this claim in an employment tribunal, you would get up to 5 years back-dated pay for the difference. UNISON would like the Council to make compensatory payments to the staff that have been underpaid so members do not have to go through a potentially lengthy and stressful employment tribunal. Aberdeenshire Council are currently in talks with us to issue compensation and we hope to have some more news soon.

If your job changes or you leave the Council, you have 5 months to raise a grievance and just under 6 months to put your claim into the courts. The courts now expect you to put in a grievance before you contact them. If you have changed job in or left the Council within the last 6 months and you think you may have a claim, you should contact us now. If you are unwilling to wait to see if the Council is going to make you an offer and you want UNISON to take forward your case at this time, again, please contact us.

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Les Chalmers,
Welfare Officer



If you would like any help filling out any forms for benefits or are in financial difficulties, please contact Les Chalmers, Welfare Officer through the branch office or on 07771 662952 or les.chalmers@virgin.net

Here are some examples of the grants (totalling £2000) given to Aberdeenshire members by UNISON Welfare in the past 3 months:

- £20/week for food/essentials (12 weeks)
- £93.20 x 3 for prescription prepayment certificates
- £100 x 2 towards heating costs
- £50 towards telephone bill
- £126.30 for TV licence
- £66 towards Home Call

.....and a letter of thanks

"I wish to thank the welfare department of UNISON for the financial assistance they gave me in my time of need. It was very much appreciated, helping to alleviate some of the problems I have had to overcome through my long period of illness. I also want to give thanks to Les Chalmers for all his support. Again, many thanks. Anne"

Maureen Corley of Gordon House is the lucky winner of £25 for working out the moon was the answer to our last competition.

Join us today!

UNISON Aberdeenshire
Grampian Area Resource Centre
7 Alford Place
Aberdeen AB10 1YD

Tel – 01224 620624
E Mail
aberdeenshire@unison.co.uk



Matters

The Newsletter for UNISON Members in Aberdeenshire

Editor: Kate Ramsden - Spring 2006

THOUSANDS TAKE ACTION

UNISON Aberdeenshire members joined thousands of their fellow trade unionists at a march and rally in Aberdeen to defend our Local Government Pension Scheme. In a march which snaked almost the length of Union Street, members demonstrated their clear anger at the UK Government and Scottish Executive's attack on Local Government Pensions.

This was the biggest rally seen in Aberdeen for more than 20 years. UNISON members joined with the GMB, T&G, UCATT and AMICUS, braved the wind and rain, to give a clear message to the UK Government and the Scottish Executive "Hands off our pensions".

"All we want is fairness and justice" said Kate Ramsden addressing the rally. "The Government has protected the pension of all current teachers, NHS staff, civil servants, Police and the Armed Forces. Why are we the ones being attacked?" she asked.

Pointing out that most LGPS members are low paid women, in emotionally and physically demanding jobs, she added "No way do we get fat cat pensions. The average pension for a woman is only £31 per week and for the majority of our members it's less than £96".

"I know how difficult it is for those of us in the public services to down tools" Kate told the rally. "We know the people we provide services for are often amongst the most vulnerable in our communities. It is a mark of our anger at these attacks on our pensions that so many of you are here today and I am proud to stand with you".



Across the UK more than 2 million trade union members took action. UNISON General Secretary, Dave Prentis said "Strike action is the only option left to local government workers to demonstrate the burning resentment and anger they feel over the government and employers taking away their pension rights when those same rights have been given to every other public sector pension scheme. "Why should they put up with this discrimination?"

Stop press ... stop press ... Local Government Pay 2006/2007

The Joint Trade Union Side of the Scottish Joint Council has agreed to put the Employers' offer of 2.5% with effect from 1 April 2006 and a further 2.5% with effect from 1 April 2007 to the membership without recommendation. This offer is the best that can be obtained by negotiation. Members of the 3 trade unions (UNISON, T&G and GMB) are to be consulted over a period up to the end of April. Your consultation paper is enclosed with this newsletter.

The views expressed in this Newsletter are not necessarily those of the UNISON Aberdeenshire Branch

Pay, pensions and single status rule again

“Déjà vu”

This year’s AGM heard once again of the significant challenges facing UNISON and the branch and those who attended took part in some interesting discussion and debate over the course of the meeting.

In welcoming members to the meeting Kate Ramsden, Branch Chair admitted to a sense of “deja vu” as issues such as single status and pensions once again took centre stage.

“We hoped that the massive YES vote in last year’s ballot would have shown the government we meant business when it comes to defending our pensions. Yet here we are again!” she said.

Pay delay

Bob Revie, Branch Secretary told the meeting about the key issues for branch members. He was assisted in this by Emma Phillips, Regional Organiser. He reported on the pay negotiations and the failure by the employers once again to stick to the agreed timetable. “It’s looking very unlikely that the pay increase will be agreed in time for the April pay packets,” Bob acknowledged, promising that UNISON and the other trade unions will keep up the pressure.

Following discussion and questions on the issues, the AGM approved a motion on Single Status and an emergency motion on Pensions. It also overwhelmingly supported a motion on Asylum Seeker Families which will now be submitted to Annual Delegate Conference. (see below)

The AGM recorded thanks to Ian McDonald, Treasurer, who has once again brought the branch accounts in on budget. “We are in a fairly healthy position financially,” he told the meeting, as the accounts were presented and accepted.

Once again there were no elections for branch officer and stewards posts and the AGM approved the nominations. The branch is still short of stewards, so if you are interested, please contact the UNISON office.

The AGM agreed a change to the branch rules. The branch will now have two Assistant Secretaries who will take a lead in service conditions matters. Both will be entitled to an honorarium for the work they put in over the year.

Vote of thanks

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks for all those who have worked so hard over the past year, especially the staff in the UNISON office in Aberdeen, without whom the branch could not function.



AGM calls for national campaign on asylum seeker families

This branch is to take the campaign to protect the rights of asylum seeker families on to the national stage. The AGM voted overwhelmingly in support of a motion condemning the treatment of failed asylum seekers and their families, and calling for an amnesty for asylum seekers in the UK. It also seeks an end to the practice of deporting unaccompanied asylum seeker children once they turn 18. This motion has now been submitted to UNISON’s Annual Delegate Conference which will be held in June.

“As a result of a motion from this branch, the Scottish Council of UNISON has already undertaken to campaign for an amnesty for failed asylum seekers and an end to the inhumane and degrading practice of dawn raids. This practice breaches human rights and the rights of the children of failed asylum seekers, and creates fear and trauma not only for those being deported but also for other refugee children who must live in terror it could happen to them,” said Kate Ramsden, Branch Chair, who proposed the motion.

“It is very important to now get this issue onto a larger stage as asylum and immigration is a reserved matter, governed by Westminster rather than Holyrood,” she added.

Kate told the meeting that the Scottish Executive is in talks with the Home Office about these matters and is trying to establish a best practice protocol to ensure that the children of failed asylum seekers are treated more humanely. UNISON Scotland has met with the Scottish Executive to try and ensure that any protocol genuinely supports the welfare and rights of these children and does not just put a human face on an inhumane practice.

“We are clear that our members will not collude with the deportation process but we are looking for ways to promote the rights and welfare of asylum seeker children. This motion calls on UNISON in England, Wales and N. Ireland to do the same,” she added.

The motion also instructs UNISON National Executive Committee to build links with practitioners, legal advisers and other relevant individuals and organisations to look at how the laws which exist to protect children can be used to challenge the inhumane practices which immigration and asylum laws appear to allow.

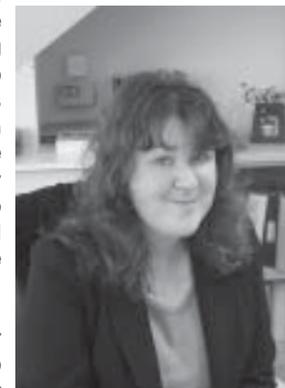
Single status gets moving again

The AGM gave a thumbs up to the actions of the branch negotiators on single status and equal pay and to the single status newsletter which has kept members informed on progress. It welcomed the information that at long last negotiations are moving forward as Aberdeenshire Council has begun to share the necessary information with the trade unions.

“We are very pleased that the unions are now in a position to get on with the job of negotiating an agreement on single status and of course we welcome the pledge from the Council to protect basic pay,” said Bob Revie, Branch Secretary. “With this however comes the difficult issue of job redesign and this will be a major feature of the coming negotiations.”

The branch has also been involved in talks with the Council to deal with the equal pay issue. Equal pay legislation means that jobs mainly done by women can be compared to jobs mainly done by men which may be higher paid, often because these jobs attract a bonus payment.

Emma Phillips, Regional Organiser, explained that the Council is considering offering an interim payment to women who are in this situation. **She urged women who have recently or are due to retire, change jobs or change contracts, and who feel they may have an equal pay claim to contact the branch office.**



Kate Ramsden, Branch Chair also called on the meeting to encourage women who may be in this situation to join the union as soon as possible so that they can be given advice and support in negotiating the best possible compensation deal.

AGM votes to protect pensions



The branch has called on all our members to vote YES in the ballot to protect our pensions and to support the action which will follow on from a YES vote.

The AGM overwhelmingly supported an emergency motion which condemned the most recent attack on the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) by both the Westminster Government and the Scottish Executive, to remove the “rule of 85” which allows members to retire on an unreduced pension if their combined age and length of service adds up to more than 85.

“The Executive has said that this rule breaches the European age discrimination directive, but legal advice commissioned by UNISON and CoSLA disputes this view,” said Bob Revie, Branch Secretary who proposed the motion. “All we want is fair treatment. The government has protected the pensions of all current civil servants, teachers, NHS staff police and the armed forces. Why should we be treated differently?” he asked.

Emma Phillips, Regional Organiser, agreed that it was important to get the public on our side. “There is a danger that people think local government workers get fat cat pensions, but that just isn’t true,” she said. “The average pension is just £3,800 and for women is only £1,600. This does not lead to a life of luxury after retirement. Life expectancy has not increased for manual workers, so making people work on for another 5 years means that many will not live to enjoy even the small pension they are entitled to,” she added.

The AGM urged members to email or write to their MSP to try and effect a u-turn on pensions. **The UNISON Scotland website has an e-letter to MSPs which can be sent with a few clicks of the mouse. Keep up the pressure by going online at www.unison-scotland.org.uk/pensions and emailing your MSP.**

Voluntary Sector—to have or have not?

UNISON members in the voluntary sector are debating whether or not to have their own branch structure. This issue has generated debate in many committees of UNISON for some period of time. There is a varied and diverse range of opinions on what should happen in the future. At one extreme there are those that feel it should not happen and others who are determined to see it come to fruition. Between these two points sit over 6,000 Scottish members who work in the voluntary sector, over 10% of the membership of UNISON Scotland.

It is important that members now begin to consider this issue and form a view of what structure they believe will best suit their needs for the future. It is widely believed that the present condition of local government finance and the restructuring of services will lead to an increase of service delivery by the voluntary sector. The natural outcome will

be an increase in voluntary sector employees and hopefully, UNISON members. We hope that such a shift of service delivery will not result in loss of jobs and members in local government. However if this change occurs, the issues that will be relevant will change as well. Will UNISON, in taking up the issues for members, become involved in supporting vulnerable people who are losing their services and become more actively involved with local councillors, MPs, MSPs and fight local battles in smaller scales? Is the present branch structure equipped to respond to this?

Many branches have a very good record of involving the voluntary sector representatives in branch business, but the voluntary sector membership does not always have an equitable share of the branch officer positions. The branch cannot always be held responsible for this, more often it is the local voluntary organisation members who do not put

themselves forward for these positions when they are vacant or elections are due.

In many instances the employer, normally the local authority, will second some branch officers in a paid capacity to undertake UNISON duties. Could, or would, the voluntary sector provide such a service for its members were it to have its own branches?

At this moment the Scottish Committee is considering a paper, and branch responses, on this very issue that was prepared by the Scottish Committee for Voluntary Organisations. As the matter progresses I will try to keep you informed through the newsletter but members should also take time to consider their own views and feel free to contact me to discuss the matter.

Joe Scoular, Voluntary Sector Steward and branch representative on SCVO Committee