

Unity

Devon County Unison
February 2003

Contents

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING	1
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAY COMMISSION	1
PEOPLES THOUGHTS	2
CPA - HOW MUCH DID IT COST DEVON?	2
THOUGHTS OF A NEW STEWARD	3
IF YOU'RE NOT MARRIED.... DON'T BOTHER US	4
WORKING FAMILIES TAX CREDITS	5
CHILDREN'S SERVICES SOCIAL WORKERS	6
DISABILITY	7
SURPRISE...SURPRISE!	7
TAILPIECE AND WELCOME	8

*Annual General Meeting
6PM on the 6 March 03
County Hall, Exeter.*

Please make every effort to attend this meeting, there are a number of issues to be discussed which are extremely important that may have negative consequences on your terms and conditions in the forthcoming year.

* changes to mileage allowance and possible loss of essential users status.

*management restructuring with in Social Services

* budget deficits which may result in cuts in all Directorates.

*introduction of car parking charges.

This is your opportunity to hear what is going on and express your opinion, please attend and let your Union know what you want them to do about the above issues.

Any motions or requests for rule changes should be received in writing to the branch office no later than the 10th February.

Hopefully I will see you at this meeting

Bernie Crean, Branch Secretary, Devon County Unison

The Local Government Pay Commission

Under the terms of the September pay deal, a Local Government Pay Commission has now been established by the National Joint Council Employers and Trade Unions (NJC). The Commission will investigate the key long term problems of equal pay and low pay which UNISON highlighted in the pay dispute. Implementation of single status will also fall within this remit.

The Commission will report to the NJC in September 2003 and its recommendations will provide the basis for future negotiations.

Unison wants the Commission to address:

- How low pay throughout council pay structures impacts on our members' lives and the council services they provide
- How unequal pay between men and women council workers effects women's income and lives
- How recruitment and retention problems have repercussions for local services
- How unfair treatment of part-time, term-time and temporary workers in council employment leads to low pay and poor career progression
- How local government privatisation impacts on the pay and conditions of council employed staff

Peoples Thoughts

What price is Care?

*He sits upon his urine sodden chair
With faeces matted in his silver hair.
His face a thousand lines of aged grief
The thought of death, Oh what a sweet relief.*

*He knows his Social Workers really care
Why make me leave my home to live
elsewhere?*

*Black finger nails in mourning for his wife?
For sixty years she shared his humble life!*

*The fluid on the floor weeps from his feet
His putrefying flesh smells sickly-sweet.
With all that he has given through his life
What price to pay for the reward of strife?*

*Their questioning goes on from day to day
Some aimed at finding out who has to pay!
The thought of leaving home compounds his
fears
Which often finds him shedding bitter tears.*

*The cost of care three hundred pounds a
week!
In my day that would buy a house complete!
Assessed no longer safe to stay at home?
Please leave now, go away, leave me alone.*

*In younger years he fought for what was
right
And gained a precious quality of life.
In latter years his fight has slipped away
The more he needs the more he has to pay!*

*The words of budget cuts and assessed need
Are alien to his ears and smack of greed.
I only want to sit in my own home
And wait to join my wife by my Lords Throne.*

William James

CPA – How much did it cost Devon?

Before Xmas, the press was full of stories of league tables of 'failing' councils. What none of the stories say is that the grading process itself has cost a cool billion pounds. Could the money have been better spent on providing better services?

The Audit Commission looked at all 150 unitary authorities and county councils, and has classified them on a scale of excellent to poor.

The Commission judged 22 as 'excellent,' 54 as 'good,' 22 'weak' and 13 'poor'. Devon came out as good across the board but failed to achieve an excellent.

The top 22 have now been promised less interference from Whitehall while the bottom 13 are going to be offered help to 'recover'.

Those councils judged under standard who are now going to find it even harder to recruit and retain the staff to maintain or improve their services to the public.

Yet another identity card

The County Councils Management Board has decided that Smart Cards in the form of an identity card should be issued to: -

- County Councillors
- All staff based on the County Hall campus
- Officers from DCC establishments who regularly visit County Hall
- Visitors and Contractors

All staff should wear the cards when on the County Hall campus

The reasons put forward for the introduction are that

- there are no corporate identity cards for use by DCC staff
-

- There are no checks on who visits and walks around County Hall buildings
- The present door key pads are very limited in their use
- The council and staff have experienced a considerable loss of equipment and personal effects

Unison has been part of the team looking at the introduction of these and a series of briefing meetings have been organised for staff to hear about the system and to ask any questions arising from it.

If you have any concerns please contact your Steward.

Thoughts of a new steward

Having been an inactive member of Unison for several years, it was the fact that other members and I were always saying that we never had any contact with the union (we had never had a rep in the workplace) that I decided that 'if nothing changes, then nothing changes', so what was I prepared to do about it?

How things changed since those first initial thoughts six months ago.

The first step was to ask Branch what requirements were needed to become a steward. No sooner than I had put my request in that I found myself on a 'New Stewards Course'.

Trepidation

It was with some trepidation that I found myself in a room full of like-minded people wondering if I would be able to understand the jargon, and would I be able to deal with problems in the workplace in confidence. The answer to both these doubts was yes, but most importantly I learnt that I didn't have to do it on my own.

Get it in writing

The experience and knowledge of the tutors was excellent. Group discussions were extremely beneficial with helping to develop listening skills, being objective, but perhaps most importantly for any steward getting a member to put things down in writing.

The course also taught me to ask if you don't understand something, and just as importantly not to be afraid to say that you don't know, if asked something that you don't know.

Help - Strike

Not long into the initial training course the one day strike was called. What do I do now? How could I answer the hundreds well tens of questions, members were asking? Go back to what I learnt on the course, ask the branch and other stewards.

With the help and support I received my workplace was successfully involved in the action, and I had to deal with management head on- with lots of nerves and bravado and a good rest afterwards.

First meeting

The first meeting with the members was quite nerve racking. I wanted them to know it was their 'union' and it was as successful as 'they' wanted to make it. Where did they like the notice board. How to get the information to them from Branch and how they could get new members. This has worked as when I started there were 19 members and now there are 41.

A Daunting Process

Being a new steward can be a daunting prospect, that its why it is important to attend the New Stewards Course and as many

of the other courses offered. They not only take away the 'mystery' of the role but they build a backup of help and information and promote working together environment within the workplace which all leads to a successful Union.

Jenny Tucker

If you're not married.... Don't bother us

Tough luck if you're reading this and you're single or in an unmarried partnership. Why? Well, 'Don't bother us', seems to be the attitude of the Local Government Pension Scheme. Equal to married people when paying in? Yes. Equal in what's paid out? No.

Of course everyone should pay into the pensions pot by the same rules. That's only fair. We're all using some of the money we've worked for to make sure we get an income for our old age. It's one of the most important uses we can make of our money. *But shouldn't the rules for paying out be equally fair?*

How does it feel, to find out that the Pension Scheme rules allow married people to get out more of the pensions pot than a single or cohabiting person will? Because if we die, we ever more numerous unmarried, no-one we've loved or supported will continue to get payouts the way surviving spouses do now.

But hang on. Doesn't that mean that the money we've put in helps the Pensions Scheme to afford the payments to someone else's surviving wife or husband? Can't be helped, say the Pensions experts, it's a historical rule and it would cost a lot more if unmarried people and single people were suddenly allowed to name a surviving beneficiary to get the 'spouses' benefit.

So aren't we generous, those thousands of us who are single or who have partners but

don't wish to marry (or can't, because we're gay or lesbian)? The question is, do we want to go on being so generous?

Our MP's saw the unfairness of the 'spouses only' rule. They recently changed their pension rules to give themselves the right to unmarried partner's benefits. They even voted themselves more pay to help fund the change. But they don't want us to have the same.

Who is trying to help us sort out the situation?

Well, some MP's are. On the 21st of January this year the Labour MP James Purnell launched a parliamentary Bill to give pension rights to unmarried couples (including same-sex couples) in Local Government. Sadly, his Bill is not expected to make it into law, because of lack of parliamentary time. And his Bill said nothing about the unequal treatment of pension investors who are single.

TUC is pushing for change

The TUC is pushing for change. They make the point that only 12% of private pension schemes exclude unmarried partners, whilst 48% of public sector ones do - ours amongst them. And of course UNISON is lobbying hard for change.

Log-jam

So where is the log-jam? Is it the Trustees of our Local Government Pension Scheme? Is it the Government? Enquiries produced the answer - contact your local MP.

Tell your MP

So why not. Tell your MP it's your money, your investment. After all, would you accept unequal treatment from high street banks and building societies?

Working Families Tax Credits

Are you bringing up children in a family with a combined income of less than £50,000?

Or are you on a low income - say less than £12,500 a year - with or without children, single or in a couple, employed or self-employed?

Congratulations! You will soon be eligible for the new child tax credit or the new working tax credit, which come into effect from April 2003. Child benefit will also continue to be paid universally to people bringing up children.

The child tax credit

This is a single system of income-related support for families with children, whether you are single, married or living with a partner.

And it applies to families earning a combined income of up to £58,000 - although those earning over £50,000 will receive a reduced benefit. It replaces the income-related child elements of Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, the working families tax credit, disabled person's tax credit and the children's tax credit.

For the first time, this credit will be paid directly to the main carer, usually the mother. And it will apply to some people who are currently excluded from other benefits, such as students and student nurses.

The child tax credit has two elements:

- the family element - payable to any eligible family, with extra for families with at least one child under the age of one (the baby element);
- the child element - for each child or young

person you are responsible for, with a disability element for any child who is disabled, and a severe disability element any child who is severely disabled. Payments will be higher for families on lower incomes.

Child Tax Credit and Child Benefit will work together to provide at least £26.80 a week in support guaranteed for all eligible families; £37.20 a week for families with an income of less than £50,000; and £92.50 a week for families with an income of less than £13,000 a year.

The working tax credit

This is top-up pay for working people on low incomes, whether or not they have children - and provides extra support for disabled people in work. It replaces the working families' tax credit, disabled person's tax credit and New Deal 50-plus employment credit.

To qualify for the basic credit, you have to be aged 25 or over, working 30 hours or more a week and on low income. But low income is not a fixed line.

A single person without children, would get a credit worth £1,245 if they earn £7,500 a year, dropping to £320 at £10,000 a year and nothing at £12,500.

For couples without children, the credit is worth £1,820 on a joint income of £10,000 a year and £895 on £12,500, tapering to nothing at a joint income of £15,000 a year. Beyond this basic element, there is:

- extra for lone parents and couples with children;
 - extra if you work more than 30 hours a week;
 - extra if you have a disability;
 - extra if you have a severe disability;
 - extra if you are over 50 and have returned
-

to work after a period on benefits;
 • extra if you use formal childcare while working, to help you pay for a proportion of the costs.

The Working Tax Credit increases the minimum income guaranteed for a single person working full time to £154 a week, rising to £183 for a couple working full time.

A disabled person working full time will see their minimum guaranteed income go from £172 a week to £193 a week.

It is the first time that people aged 25 or more, without children or a disability and who work more than 30 hours a week, are eligible for a tax credit.

How do I claim?

You must claim as soon as possible in order to receive the new credits when they come into force in April.

If you have access to the internet you can fill in your claim form online. Or you can claim by post, by filling in a single claim form for the household, which covers both new tax credits. You can also get help at an Inland Revenue enquiry centre - look in the phone directory under Inland Revenue for your nearest office.

If you are already claiming Working Families Tax Credit, Disabled Person's Tax Credit or Children's Tax Credit, you should already have been sent a claim pack in the post.

If you are already claiming Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance, you will be contacted by the Department for Work and Pensions - you don't have to do anything now.

Children's Services Social Workers

As a representative of UNISON, I have been attending meetings with management, attempting to address the recruitment and retention crisis amongst children's social workers. I am a steward located in Exeter District - Children's Services.

The recently agreed proposals for increasing salary scales to 38 are a positive response to this issue.

From my own experience and through talking to colleagues, I am aware that comparatively low salaries are not the only reasons for staff wishing to leave. Assuming that a content workforce is less likely to be looking for work elsewhere, it serves our interests and those of management if we can objectively and accurately identify these reasons.

So that I can more accurately represent member's views on this I am keen to obtain the views of as many children's social workers as possible. To help identify this information I have tabulated what I think are the pertinent questions.

Please identify the nature of the team that you employed in?

Are you employed full time or part time?

Have you actively attempted to obtain alternative employment within the last six months?

Are you currently actively looking for alternative employment?

Please identify some of the reasons for this (positive for wanting to stay - negative for wanting to leave).

Please identify specific changes that could realistically be made that would lead you to

feel more positive about remaining in your present position.

I would be pleased if you could respond to these or simply give me your views by contacting me on X3080 or via Outlook. I will maintain the confidentiality of the identity of any of those responding.

Mike Rosser Social Services.

Disability

If you are disabled, contact your Branch Disability Officer Graham Parkhouse through the Branch Office at the Matford Offices, County Hall. Find out what action and news there is for disabled members in the south west Free copy of Unisons South west Disabled members magazine.

Call us now on 01392 382530

We can offer large print versions of Unity as request and can we find out how to offer it to visually impaired members via tape?

Surprise...surprise!

What was it about UNISON's 10th National Lesbian and Gay Conference that surprised me the most?

The venue? No, the Plymouth Pavilions seemed as good a venue as any place in that city. The Hotel and Pavilions staff were pleasant, at least to me and two woman I got chatting to. But some men reported edgy situations in their hotels.

The organisation? Excellent. UNISON knows how to run a competent conference. They even had a pre-conference explanation session so 'first timers' like me could find out what to expect. And I was glad to have a trial run of speaking at the podium, because it

took away a lot of my nerves when I actually had to address the Local Government audience. More of which later.

The advertising and directions? Well that was a little surprising. There were no street signs to help those of us who were walking to the venue. Once there, there was a huge banner hanging on the outside of the Plymouth Pavilions. But it just announced a UNISON Conference. It said nothing about it being Lesbian and Gay.

Such a contrast with three weeks before, when my partner and I (and almost 3,000 other women) were in York for the Libertas! Lesbian Book Festival. Lamp posts between our hotel and the venue held up bold posters pointing out the direction. Long before we reached the venue, at the York Racecourse Centre, we could see a vast sign strung across its road-bridge - LIBERTAS! LESBIAN PRIDE FESTIVAL 2002. It created such a welcoming feeling. UNISON take note.

So was it the social side of the conference that was the biggest surprise? Sorry, I didn't go to the two UNISON socials or visit any of Plymouth's gay/lesbian bars. They may well have been highly surprising. Certainly the resulting repartee across the conference floor each following day roused lots of laughter.

And the reason I didn't go was because I didn't know anyone to go with. The fact that total strangers were all friendly wasn't the same as actually being at the conference with someone. From our very large Branch I was the only representative. Out of the entire South West region, it looked like there were just twenty-five or thirty of us attending. We had the first row of seats on one side of the hall. It was clear that, despite the conference being in our Region, we were greatly outnumbered by the big-city Branch members from up-country.

How could that be? Well, for a start, how many of you reading this *even knew* that the UNISON Lesbian and Gay Conference was taking place just down the road in Plymouth? Even more amazingly; not the 1st Annual Conference but the 10th. Yes, the biggest surprise for me was that the Conference even existed.

Last August Diva magazine had an advert which gave UNISON's Lesbian and Gay website, www.unison.org.uk/out. From visiting the website I went on to register with the South West Region (in Bristol) to receive *Out In UNISON*, the national newsletter and *LogOUT*, the Local Government Bulletin. In these I saw that the Conference would be close to home, and the rest, as they say, was, err, geography.

So the next question is why? Why am I writing this? Why does UNISON promote Lesbian and Gay interests? All I can say is that each of the motions to Conference demonstrated exactly why, and over the next few issues of *Unity* I hope some space can be made for me to discuss the relevance of some of them.

And how did I end up addressing the audience in the Local Government feedback session? By drawing the short straw! It got me voted group spokesperson when we divided up into small working parties to discuss the proposed changes in Government legislation. **this is a very special year for us as by December a range of legislation intended to improve our rights must be passed by Government. Can we be sure it will be sensible and helpful legislation if we don't speak up about what we need? And doesn't speaking up entail visibility?**

So the feedback from my working group was - we need to be out in our Branches, so that others can find a voice; whether or not

they are equally encouraged to be out. We all need to discuss the proposed legislation: to make ourselves heard.

And it's no good saying 'something should be done' but leaving it to others to do it. I went to the January Branch Executive Meeting at County Hall to report on the Conference. That was another first, for them and me, but from the positive reaction I got, I look forward to further meetings. If fate agrees I'll be at the Branch AGM - happy to meet those Members who attend. But I still feel too much at risk if I put my name and contact address in *Unity* to be seen by everyone.

To everyone, I apologise. I'd love it to be otherwise. One day it will be. Meanwhile I hope you'll be understanding and reach me via UNISON Devon County Branch, Matford Offices, County Hall, Topsham Road, EXETER, EX2 4QW. Please mark your envelope CONFIDENTIAL, L & G

Tailpiece and Welcome

This is the first issue for some time and a new editor puts his head above the parapet. It is intended to publish at least every two months and more often if required. Contributions are welcome in electronic form if possible (my typing is very slow) and should be sent to the Union Office at County Hall

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