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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

March 2018

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Thanks to everyone who made it to our Annual General Meeting. We thought the weather would be a problem, and whilst it made it hard for some members to attend, we still had the usual turnout we've come to expect from such a great group of loyal trade unionists. We also had many first-time attendees, which was brilliant.

Sandy Nicoll (pictured) from UNISON's National Executive Council outlined some of the issues facing higher education workers and we had a vibrant discussion with loads of questions from members on a variety of issues. We are going to try to be more visible and imaginative with the way we communicate in future and our new Communications Officer is making plans to make sure all our members are engaged and involved in the branch as much as possible.

Several people said they were interested in getting more involved. If you're inspired to join us as an officer, steward or rep, then just let us know.

As a follow-up to the AGM for members at City Campus, Falmer, Eastbourne and Hastings, we'll be planning meetings open to all members at each site over the next six weeks or so. We'll let you have details as soon as we can.

In this week's newsletter, we have stuff about the staff survey, estates uniforms, apprentices and International Women's Day. Please let us have any comments or questions.

*Ivan Bonsell,
Branch Secretary*



International Women's Day

When the twenty first century dawned, young women in the US and much of Europe were being told that equality was within their grasp. They didn't need feminism because capitalism was offering a glittering future based on growing prosperity and gender equality.

Today that illusion lies in ruins. Worldwide the myth of capitalist progress - of young people having greater opportunities than their parents - has been shattered by the world economic crisis of 2008 and its aftermath.

Young people from working and middle class backgrounds are facing a world that does not meet their expectations - dominated by mass unemployment, low paid and insecure work, cuts to public services, and unaffordable housing. War and conflict are on the rise, leading to millions risking their lives as they are forced to flee their homes. For women this is combined with the sexual discrimination which remains embedded in the fabric of society and means that, in a world of low pay, globally women still earn on average 10-30% less than men.



In the neo-colonial world, where most wages are pitifully low, women are super-exploited. They work sometimes 12 hours or more a day on the land, in the markets, in textile and shoe factories. In many places, women and their children work as modern-day slaves.

Far from there being an automatic gradual dying out of sexual discrimination, in a number of countries governments are acting to exacerbate it. In Russia, for instance, where it is estimated a women dies of domestic abuse every forty minutes, domestic violence has been partially decriminalised.

Austerity has impacted directly on the amount of violence and harassment women face, and their ability to fight back. In Britain, for example, more than 30 refuges for women fleeing violence have closed due to lack of funds, with many of the rest facing closure or, at best, severe cuts. At the same time the complete absence of affordable housing leaves women with nowhere at all to go if they flee violent partners.

Or look at the nine out of ten workers in Britain who work in bars, restaurants and hotels who report having faced sexual abuse from employers, managers or the public but who are told that 'it is part of the job' which they should put up with because they are lucky to have work.

Today, no less than in the past, improvements in women's rights will not happen automatically but only as a result of mass struggle.

That is why International Women's Day, over a century after it was first initiated in the US, is more important than ever. Attempts to transform it into little more than a sales opportunity for the big corporations - with campaigns to buy the women in your life 8 March gifts - lie increasingly forgotten as 8 March becomes an important event in the burgeoning global struggle against women's oppression.

We welcome the University's attempts to celebrate and encourage the achievements of women, but as Emily Brooks, our Equality Coordinator has pointed out on the University Discussion Board, this should not just be about high-flying academics who have made "an impact". What about the hundreds of women working at the University whose contributions are just as valuable? You wouldn't think that, given the material rewards available for many working women.

The UK living wage is now £8.75/hour, and yet many grade 1 staff (disproportionately women) at the bottom two spinal points have seen their rate of pay fall below this.

For those of us calling ourselves trade unionists and socialists, International Women's Day is a recognition of the struggle of working class women to fight for their rights as part of a global struggle against oppression and violence and for genuine liberation. This involves an end to exploitation and injustice for all working people, but women in particular.

If the University wants to demonstrate that they have a real interest in International Women's Day as it was originally conceived, we look forward to a commitment to becoming a Living Wage Employer, a reduction in the 37 hour working week and an equalisation to 35 days annual leave for all, irrespective of grade.

UNIFORMS FOR ESTATES STAFF

The University wants to introduce a policy which says that all front-facing Estates staff will wear a uniform at all times whilst at work.

Some EFM staff already wear branded clothing, but this policy will make it a disciplinary offence to wear anything other than the clothing which will be provided by the University free of charge.

We are broadly supportive of a policy if it strengthens health and safety and many members of staff will welcome having clothing provided for them.

What we do have issues about are the potential for managers to be inflexible about members of staff sticking to the policy, a lack of any consideration for laundry allowances and appropriate changing and storage facilities.

We have discussed the policy several times and the University have agreed to make some changes, but we need to find out what our members think, given that they'll be the ones wearing the uniform.

Our main issues at the moment are:

- Flexibility for members of staff who do not feel comfortable with some aspects of the uniform.
- Proper changing and storage facilities.
- The ability of staff to wash their uniform.
- An allowance for laundry costs.

As with any policy, it's normally how flexible the application is which makes the difference between a policy that makes sense and allows things to run smoothly and one which gives managers the ability to discipline and ultimately dismiss people for breaches to policy which don't matter that much.

The argument that staff need to have a uniform to present a professional image falls apart unless we all have to wear one. Otherwise, it's saying that EFM staff are different from other front-facing members of staff (lecturers, students support desk workers, library workers). Nobody is proposing a uniform for them.

So, if you're working in Estates as Technical staff, Grounds staff, Caretakers, Cleaning Supervisors and Cleaners, then we would like to know what you think, as soon as you can.

STAFF SURVEY 2018: A staff engagement survey which fails to address work-related stress

The University is surveying its employees for the first time in many years. Whilst we would expect that to happen periodically, we need to explain to everyone what we wanted to happen in relation to a survey addressing stress and what's actually happened.

The suggestion that "*both Unison and UCU have been involved in the design of the survey, particularly the health and wellbeing elements of it*" is a serious misrepresentation of our position. We have been involved, but we have not reached anything which we would call an agreement.

Throughout 2017, UNISON and UCU safety reps demanded that the Safety and Welfare Committee (SAWC) address the issue of stress by conducting a survey, then acting on the results. We were (and still are) sure that many members of staff are experiencing stress-related symptoms as a result of poorly-managed changes, unmanageable workloads and working environments.

We reached agreement with SAWC that this would happen, but as is customary at the University when it's something we want to happen, months dragged on and then it was decided that the new Director of People would commission a staff engagement survey, and we could include the elements of a stress survey in it.

If we're honest, we were sceptical about this, but went along with discussions to combine the two. Our principle was that the survey must include enough of the Health and Safety Executive's recognised 35 stress-related questions so that we could adequately assess the issue of stress and act on it.

We were given chance to talk about which external organisation to use and then presented with the proposed questions to be asked, giving us two days to discuss them and agree changes to meet the deadline of getting it out before Easter. (This was two days, after about a year of inaction before a staff engagement survey was announced.)

Our assessment of the first draft was that about 14 out of the 35 were included, although in every case the question wording was amended to sound more positive, for example, "I am unable to take sufficient breaks from my work" is now "I am able to take breaks from my work."

The remaining 35 questions were either not addressed at all or hinted at. Either way, the survey did not meet our expectations of what is required.

After some frantic discussion, we agreed that the wording on some questions would be amended, but since we could not include enough of the crucial HSE questions in a form which we thought was adequate, we decided that we cannot support this staff engagement survey as a stress survey.

So, we still call for SAWC to do what it agreed to do—arrange a stress survey and then act on the findings. If the management side of SAWC are going to maintain that this survey addresses stress then we will arrange to do our own and we'll let you know how to participate in that once we have it up and running.

In the meantime, we would encourage all members who want to participate in the survey to be honest but please remember that this is not something that either union has agreed. It is at best, a missed opportunity or at worst, a cynical attempt to avoid carrying out what has been agreed.

We're happy to support Sussex Defend the NHS is the battle to defend public healthcare.

Private Profit Before Public Value: The Scandal of PFI



PRIVATE FINANCE INITIATIVE: How come we're still paying for it?

Exhibition: BMECP 24th 26th 27th March

In 2015-16, £10bn was paid from the public purse to the private sector for PFI contracts in publicly provided services including health, education and housing.

See more in this photographic exhibition by Marion Macalpine & Helen Mercer <http://peoplevspfi.org.uk/>

Saturday 24th March: Exhibition open 11am - 5pm

Launch event with refreshments from 1pm

1.30pm Opening of exhibition by Lloyd Russell-Moyle MP, then Q&A with Helen Mercer, People vs PFI

Monday 26th & Tuesday 27th March: Exhibition open 10am - 5pm

Tuesday 27th March: Public Meeting 7.30 - 9pm

Private Profit before Public Value: The Scandal of PFI

Helen Mercer - People vs PFI

Youssef El-Gingihy - GP & NHS Campaigner

Diane Montgomery - Living Rent Campaigner

Sally Hunt - General Secretary UCU

At BMECP Centre 10a Fleet Street, Brighton BN1 4ZE

www.defendthenhsussex.weebly.com

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University of Brighton Apprentices

Yes, we'll support good schemes, but we're not agreeing to exploitative box-ticking exercises

We welcome apprentice schemes which are a great way for people (who may not have benefited from university level education) to receive high quality on-the-job training, which is adequately paid and gives consideration to the time and effort required by existing staff to train them properly. A good apprentice scheme should also lead to a proper job at the correct rate of pay and should not be used to undermine the terms and conditions of existing staff.

Unfortunately, the scheme as proposed by the University fails on most of these.

They want to organise apprentice schemes which:

- Will not lead to a permanent role
- Will pay £5.60/hour for the first year and then (age-dependent) minimum wage after that
- Expect existing staff to manage the apprentice, provide training and complete their own work

We have said that this constitutes trying to run apprentice schemes on the cheap. For us to reach agreement requires there to be a properly managed plan, which would involve the mentor looking after the apprentice to be able to manage and deliver a training plan with fully-funded backfill for the massive amount of time this would take.

We also require the apprentices to receive at the very least, the full £7.83/hour minimum wage, irrespective of their age and from day one. (This practice is already in place for Students' Union paid interns and we can't accept the discrimination inherent in the minimum wage rates.)

The University will argue that they can't afford this, but there's no requirement for them to do this at all! It will cost money and it will increase the staff costs!

We don't need to have apprentices any more than the University was obliged to waste thousands of pounds sponsoring academies and assisting in the privatisation of state schools.

We're not being negative about this. If anything, the University's policy is the most negative—trying to tick the apprentice box whilst cynically exploiting (probably) young workers and expecting us all to go along with it.



We say, yes, by all means, let's have apprentices, but let's treat them with some respect and give proper consideration for the people expected to manage them.

We hope to be able to sign an agreement with the University based on those principles.

If not then we will react to the University trying to impose inferior terms and conditions on support staff, which have not been agreed by the recognised trade union.