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Open Book

A bulletin by and for University of London workers
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The outsourced workers' strike at the University of London – 27 and 28 November 2013

The historic strike action taken by IWGB members against the facilities management contractor Balfour Beatty Workplace was the culmination of a year-long campaign for equal rights for all workers at the University of London. Despite massive support for this, the 3 Cosas Campaign, the University of London and BBW refused all offers of negotiation – claiming instead to be in talks with the 'officially recognised' union, UNISON.

The hollowness of UNISON's claim to represent the workers was exposed on 27 and 28 November when a huge and unprecedented strike took place, leading the University and the company to immediately announce plans to improve terms and conditions.

UNISON, BBW and the UoL jointly claimed that these concessions were nothing to do with the strike, and were a triumph for 'moderation' over 'intimidation'. We leave it to readers to judge whether the announcement, on the second day of the biggest strike in living memory was a coincidence – or whether calling it one was just the last desperate insult of an employer which knew it had been defeated.

The reasons why the 3 Cosas dispute continues

The IWGB University of London branch has given notice to BBW of 3 more days of industrial action, to take place on the 27, 28 and 29 January 2014.

Last month's strike produced major concessions for the outsourced workers' campaign. Thanks to a great display of solidarity during the strike, BBW immediately announced improvements to holiday and sick pay conditions (though these are still not in line with those received by directly employed workers).

However, rather than negotiate directly with the IWGB, BBW instead agreed a deal with UNISON, which ignored workers' demands for a proper pension, and for safeguards for the jobs of the Garden Halls workers.

It is obviously deeply disappointing that the IWGB, by far the largest union among BBW employees, was not

consulted regarding these proposals. Members decided unanimously at an emergency branch meeting to continue to take strike action until all their demands were met: **recognition of the IWGB; safeguards for the Garden Halls jobs; and equal rights for outsourced workers including pension entitlements.**

Questions remain over Senate House Library

In the aftermath of the Shakespeare folio episode, and the departure of its Director and his right hand man the Head of Digital Futures, Senate House Library has seen some changes. The University of London has taken SHL in hand, with restructuring which will remove much of the autonomy of the SHL management. The Library will have a 'Librarian' and not a 'Director', and it is assumed that the post will be merely an operational one, with strategic decisions made by the VC / his team. Indeed, the VC's team has already begun to exert tight control over SHL, making decisions about exhibitions, and ensuring close scrutiny over expenditure, in contrast to the free-spending previous 3 years.

It is perplexing why some of the previous regime (the Director, his Head of Digital Futures) have been held responsible for the Shakespeare folio debacle and are no longer here, whereas others of his senior management team (in particular, the Keeper of Historic Collections, who presumably had responsibility for the folios) have remained in post and untroubled by the shake-up. (*Continued overleaf*)

Huge national support for 3 Cosas

Beyond Bloomsbury, the 3 Cosas campaign's clear aims for equality and dignity at work have struck a chord on a national scale.

Coverage in the Guardian, Independent and Times Higher Education drew massive attention from readers in the UK and beyond. The campaign also recently won an award from the prestigious New Economics Foundation (NEF) for best campaign of 2013!

(Continued) Ironically, the said Keeper has now been tasked with vetting Library budgets / expenditure, keeping a close eye on even the smallest payment, despite having enjoyed the hotel / health spa / iPad / Pret a Manger largesse of former years. Perhaps it is punishment enough for the surviving members of the previous senior management team that they will no longer enjoy such high living.

Amongst the rank and file staff, morale remains low, partly as a result of the reputational damage to their workplace following the folio/Bonhams PR disaster. Another resignation took place early this year. The 'upstairs downstairs' policy instigated by the previous Director remains in place (which has only the lowest paid or 'clerical' staff working the unsocial hours). Communication remains poor and consultation is non-existent (as a recent order for several staff to vacate their offices to make way for 'more expensive' colleagues demonstrated). Intimidation by senior managers is still the norm.

Another cause for concern has been the peculiar 'grace and favour' recruitment/promotion strategy adopted by the previous management. Several staff have been given significant pay upgrades, but not via accepted methods of job assessment/appraisal (neither of which take place in SHL), but apparently on a whim. At least two staff were appointed to posts without advertisement, application or interview. One of these is a senior manager's post.

However, whilst morale is low, it will be lower still if any of the surviving senior management team are appointed to the post of Librarian!

HE pay dispute: resist a fait accompli!

On 8 January, the University of London announced that it would proceed to unilaterally implement the derisory 1% pay rise offered by the University & Colleges Employers Association (UCEA).

The dispute is still live, however. Workers need to put pressure on their unions to continue and escalate industrial action to avoid yet another year of pressure on workers' budgets.

Unfortunately, every sign is that the HE unions are looking for a way to put the dispute to bed. UNISON have called a 'day of action' in January but no further strikes, and the UCU strategy of localised, two hour strikes represents a de-escalation after having had two co-ordinated national one-day strikes already.

The UCU branch at the Institute of Education (IOE) has written to the union's Higher Education Committee and national officers.

The letter said: "The two hour strike is in our view atomistic, divisive and cannot be implemented in any way that could make it effective as a form of industrial

action. Such a strategy will expose member to isolation and management intimidation and as such risks bringing UCU into serious disrepute amongst members and will undo the many years of hard work we have put into increasing union membership in our branch.

The Higher Education Sector Conference has repeatedly given HEC a clear mandate to take vigorous and effective industrial action in support of a fair wage claim. The time to escalate the industrial action is now." (full text: <http://tinyurl.com/ucuhe>)

Union members in Senate House should mandate their union branches to write similar letters to the UCU Higher Education Committee or UNISON Higher Education Service Group to press for an escalation of the pay dispute.

Cross-union meetings in higher education institutions should meet to discuss the dispute and plan for effective future action.

Vice Chancellor's Pay: the joke isn't funny anymore

VC's at the UK's top universities pocketed an average pay rise of £22,000 this year while holding ordinary workers at 1%.

David Eastwood at The Birmingham University has the highest declared basic salary – £400,000 – up from £372,000 the previous year.

Cambridge's Sir Leszek Borysiewicz University had his pay packet boosted by £20,000 to £334,000.

Sky-rocketing VC's and senior managers' pay reflects the increasing marketization of higher education, and its integration into the gears of capitalist society. As much is admitted by the director general of the Russell Group, who defended the rises: "The salaries of vice-chancellors and other senior staff at our universities reflect their roles leading extremely complex, international organisations with annual turnovers of more than half a billion pounds on average."

Unions need to take up the demand raised by recent university occupations for a 10:1 pay ratio between the lowest-paid staff and those at the very top, and fight for staff and student control over our institutions.

The Open Book is a bulletin written by and for UoL workers, and published by Workers' Liberty, an organisation fighting as part of the labour movement for a socialist alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism, based on common ownership and democracy.

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