



No to corporate fat-cat culture in Shelter

Scrap this deal!

SINCE HIS arrival in 2003, Shelter's head-honcho has seen his salary increase from "between £50-60,000" to "between £90-100,000". He is paid more than the top boss at Oxfam, despite Shelter having a massively lower turnover than the NGO.

The bosses who award themselves pay-rises of this scale are the same people who are now aggressively pushing the deal that will see your pay and conditions slashed.

In case you need reminding, the worst of the deal includes:

- Immediate downgrading of one third of frontline advice posts by £3k
- Removal of pay increments currently worth around £2.5k over three years
- Extension of the working week from 35 hours to 37.5 hours
- Introduction of new, disastrous, working practices which would effectively create a two or three-tier workforce of housing advisers doing the same jobs and leave Shelter as an unprincipled lapdog of the government funding agencies.

This is a ruthless attack on (mainly) low-paid and overworked voluntary sector workers. The insidious ethos that pervades many charities, whereby workers are expected to develop some kind of martyr complex and made to feel as if they should put up with attacks on their pay and conditions out of some kind of philanthropic instinct, must be resisted; underpaid, overworked staff who are bullied into accepting deals by their management are not going to be capable of effectively fulfilling the needs of Shelter service-users.

The deal proposed by management isn't something we can tinker with; it needs to be stopped in its tracks and scrapped altogether. Elected Unite (TGWU) shop stewards and workplace activists need to be in control of the dispute – in terms of the production of material (leaflets, placards, banners etc.) and in terms of deciding where the action should go next – to make sure that it can't be hijacked by people who are more concerned about getting back around the table with their management pals than they are about winning.



Shelter versus Ken Loach?

The media coverage of the dispute so far has cast the conflict as one between Shelter and its "spiritual founder", Ken Loach. Ken has called for a boycott of donations to Shelter until the dispute is resolved. While Ken's support is valuable and welcome, it's important to be clear about the real nature of this conflict; it's not between Ken as an individual and Shelter's management, it's between workers and their bosses. A class focus is necessary; rather than straightforwardly calling for a boycott of Shelter, Ken should be calling for people to donate to the union's strike fund.

Shelter and the housing crisis

Although Shelter provides a valuable service to many people in bad housing – or with no housing at all – there are problems with some of the campaigns it launches around issues of the housing crisis.

For the two million-odd people who live in council houses, the government is doing everything in its power to sell the homes to private housing associations. Millions of pounds have been spent in trying to convince tenants to give up their tenancies to a private housing contractor, and all sorts of dirty tricks have been employed to rig the votes.

In 2003-4 Commons Public Accounts Committee concluded that selling off council housing costs the taxpayer at least £1,300 a home more than councils doing the improvements themselves. But the real scandal is that whereas a private housing association would use rent money to maintain its housing stock and reinvest in future developments, central government takes £1.5 billion out of the Housing Revenues Account each year and plugs it into other projects (Defend Council Housing 2004-5).

The only way to get some of this money back is to agree to one of the government's three privatisation schemes – Stock transfer, PFI or ALMO. Council tenants are being offered an ultimatum: either give up cheap rents, democratic accountability and publicly-owned housing for future generations or watch while we let your house fall into disrepair. Thankfully, the council tenants are seeing through all this blackmail and fighting back.

Shelter's recent campaign for 20,000 new houses on green and brownfield sites is muddying the waters. The problem with houses is that some people own more than they need. Shelter should be siding with the grassroots campaign to defend council housing and raising serious objections to second (and multiple)-home ownership.

As a "respectable" NGO it is being used as a feel-good PR machine for the government and its fat cat friends in order that they can gain public support for their agenda to destroy our green spaces and build Noddy homes in the interests of private profit.

To really solve the housing crisis, we can't rely on playing on middle-class guilt about homelessness. Shelter should link up with council housing campaigners to launch a real, grassroots working-class campaign for decent housing for all.

For Shelter to make any impact on homelessness in bad housing, beyond bringing about the resolution of individual cases, it needs to be taken out of the hands of fat cat managers and to develop answers to the big political questions that cause the problems they seek to combat. We know that Shelter staff want to work in an organisation like this, and the first step to achieving it is to win this dispute!



The Alliance for Workers' Liberty

The AWL is a revolutionary socialist organisation active in the British labour movement. We stand for democratic working-class struggle against capitalism and a society organised in the interests of human need, not private profit. AWL members active in the UNITE trade union have been centrally involved in supporting the Shelter dispute. For more information on the AWL and our ideas, phone 020 7207 3997, email awl@workersliberty.org or visit our website at www.workersliberty.org
