



## ***Shelter dispute: build on the success of 5 March***

# **Escalate the action now!**

The first strike in Shelter's history was a bigger success than either the management or, to be truthful, the union officials were expecting. At Shelter's head office in London, 170 out of 200 workers stayed out. In Sheffield, only around half a dozen frontline staff scabbed. And in Scotland, there was a total shutdown.

Management is already visibly shaken. Police appeared at several picket lines across the country, and in at least one location (London) were definitely called by managers – ostensibly to stop pickets from blocking the street, but, given that even on the police's own account no such blockage existed, management were obviously looking for cheap tactics to intimidate strikers.

Adam Sampson has also recently cited a week-long strike at Amnesty International that took place "last year", and after which apparently everything went back to normal, as an example of how striking is ineffective in the voluntary sector. But Amnesty workers who visited the Old Street picket line on 5 March reported that the strike had actually taken place several years ago (not last year as Sampson claimed) and had in fact resulted in a victory for the workers!

Clearly Shelter bosses are nervy; they'll be reeling at the success and solidity of the action, but as yet remain publicly intransigent. To force them to back down, the strike needs to be built on from this position of strength. A rapid escalation towards longer, more sustained activity is necessary.

Strikers in Scotland organised a march and a rally to supplement their picketing; the union should help workers across the UK do the same.

The dispute should be made as public and high profile as possible, and Unite should call on other voluntary sector workers, and the wider labour movement, to provide whatever support they can.

The Shelter strike is in essence a strike against the onslaught of corporate models that see workers' wages and conditions slashed. These models are proliferating not only across the voluntary sector but in bits of the public sector too, such as the civil service.

The Shelter dispute has ramifications for groups of workers beyond those immediately

involved. To ensure success, workers on the ground must fight for control of their own dispute. If it is led by full-time union officials entrenched in years-long chummy relationships with management, they will look for any opportunity to acquiesce and capitulate.

Frontline staff can't let that happen; speak to your Unite steward about convening a local strike committee to produce materials (leaflets, placards, banners) and plan actions (rallies, demonstrations etc.) for the next round of strikes.

It's important that strikers going out and actively getting support - leafletting public on strike days, speaking to unions branch meetings, collecting outside workplaces, getting as much publicity as possible.

## **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 guilty 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!

## National strike fund needed

Some Shelter workers are understandably nervous about the prospect of escalated or drawn-out action, as it may potentially mean significant loss of pay. That's why it's vital that the union sets up a national strike fund and solicits donations from right across the trade union movement.

Already, members of the public who donate to Shelter have expressed a desire to give money to a strike fund, as well as several union branches.

Supporting its members while they're in dispute with their bosses is one of the fundamental roles of a trade union; if Unite nationally drags its feet over setting up a fund, local stewards should take the initiative

themselves to make sure their members have a financial cushion that could give them the confidence to push for escalated action.



## Don't Sign! Resist!

If you're one of the people who have not yet signed the contract variation memos that Shelter bosses are trying to bully staff into signing, then we say stand strong until the last!

Shelter doesn't actually want to sack anyone, because of the negative publicity it could generate and because Shelter would then run the risk of unfair dismissal claims at the Employment Tribunal; so management are trying to bully or trick staff into signing their terms and conditions away - to obtain their "consent".

It's great that those staff who have signed the memos are still striking, but it would've been better for them to hang on for longer, so if you still haven't signed, DON'T!

You have your WHOLE notice period in which to sign, if they take away the offer of re-engagement before your notice runs out, your dismissal will almost certainly be legally UNFAIR. The law is no friend to workers, but you should make full use of your rights here and make it as difficult as possible for Shelter to force their cuts through!

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