

# Workers' Liberty

UNISON Local Government Conference Bulletin

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As a Storm of Cuts hits Jobs and Services:

## Build branches and a rank and file movement to prepare the fightback!

This conference will see debates around defending services in the midst of a storm of swingeing cuts. Although the specifics of the cuts will be local the union needs to have a national campaign to inform and unite these struggles. The cost of allowing local branches to fight alone has been seen in the implementation of Single Status which has led to inequalities in pay and conditions between authorities. The current round of cuts may further widen those gaps finally and fatally undermining existing national agreements.

The case of Baby Peter highlighted the tragic effects of the business culture which has already penetrated deeply into all areas of local authority life. Vital, life saving decisions, are now being deferred to save a few thousand pound in court costs. UNISON stood up in defence of social workers and conference will be discussing motions on building a national campaign to develop universal standards of care and limits on caseloads. In supporting action we must reflect on recent weaknesses and in particular last year's pay campaign. Undermined by low turnouts in some areas, a prolonged period of inaction and overall by a lack of strategy about what would happen after the first 2 days of action the final move towards arbitration was a defeat. The resulting lack of confidence amongst members in taking action must be overcome and the positive examples of ongoing disputes, in Glasgow for example, can be used to build confidence anew.

But the background of a declining activist base and levels of branch activity mean that basic questions of organisation, recruiting members and developing stewards' networks cannot be overlooked. The current witch-hunts, victimisations of left activists, are another

symptom of that broader democratic deficit inside the union seen most starkly in the low turnout in the NEC elections. Officials, both appointed and elected, must be open to challenge and being held accountable by members. We can start by building local branches and networks of activist creating a force embedded in workplaces that can fight both local struggles and inside the union for democratic change. That rank and file perspective should be at the heart of any talk of left regroupment and rebuilding the union, a discussion that will be had at this conference but must be continued and developed in branches and workplaces in the year to come.

We should also not forget that in this fight we are not alone. Organising together in common struggle activists have revived trades' councils in many areas. Local government workers can find support and solidarity there from others who will see our fight as only the first in a series of battles to come. There are also the communities we serve, already in Lambeth and elsewhere branches have successfully taken their campaigns outside of the workplace to build and renew alliances with community groups, tenants organisations etc.

- Unite local disputes into a national campaign in defence of services
- Build branches and networks of activists to strengthen the union at a local level.
- For a national forum of activists and branch reps to develop tactics and share experience and knowledge of the fight for jobs and services
- No branch should be left to stand alone: organise local solidarity networks through Trades Councils and the support of local communities and campaigns.