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Campaign News

Million Voices moves up a gear

This month will see the launch of an exciting new phase in UNISON's "Million Voices" campaign for public services.

The campaign has been gathering support up and down the country with 300 UNISON branches now signed up to the pledge and beginning to take the message out into workplaces and local communities.

Barnsley health and local government branches joined forces to run a street stall and take the message to local people. More than 100 signed up there and then pledged their support for public services. In Nottinghamshire, services could be devastated by the council threat to cut £33 million from the budget with up to 1,400 job losses. The branch has launched a GPF-funded billboard campaign for public services and to win support for possible industrial action.

Already these activities are making a difference. But we are now entering a critical period as the government sets out its Budget in preparation for a general election expected in May. Keep checking the Million Voices website for major new publicity initiatives and actions you can take to support the campaign: <http://www.unison.org.uk/million>

Positively Public quotes of the season!!

"The service has not been the same since the councils lost their contracts to treat the trunk roads ... [private firms] are tendering at such a low rate that they can't possibly deliver the same service."

Les Gray, Scottish Police Federation chair, on road safety during the winter freeze

"Our direct services workforce have worked sterlingly all day to keep things moving as safely as possible – I'm not being political but it's at times like these I'm grateful we haven't privatised everything as the willingness of our people to help out wherever and whenever needed would be difficult to mirror."

Steve Greenslade, director of resources and customer service, Monmouthshire County Council

UNISON wins justice for contract staff

200 NHS workers in Devon whose jobs had been outsourced will finally be employed on the same pay and conditions as directly employed NHS staff.

UNISON negotiated the Agenda for Change agreement to bring fair and equal pay into the NHS, and is now working to ensure that this is not undermined by private firms looking to win contracts by undercutting in-house rates. The North Devon NHS Trust had outsourced ancillary services to private multinational Sodexo, which then refused to pay NHS rates for 3 years. After a two-day strike the cleaners, cooks and porters finally saw a salary increase from January, along with benefits such as sick pay and back pay lump sums of up to £3,600.

People's Inquiry into Library Services

UNISON held a People's Inquiry into the UK library service last month at the British Library.

The event was well attended by library professionals, library users, stakeholders and trade unionists who shared their views and experiences about the challenges facing the library service and how the service can be improved for the 21st century.

It is a critical time for the library service. The government is expected to publish a policy statement following on from its libraries "modernisation review" this spring. Meanwhile a BBC survey of how local authorities are responding to tightening public finances found that "councils are targeting libraries for a funding squeeze that will hit them hard over the next three to five years".

The Inquiry was overseen by a Panel, which included the biographer Ann Thwaite, journalist Rachel Cook, children's authors Michael Rosen and Joe Craig and author Sue Townsend, and it was chaired by Radio 4's Sue MacGregor. Key note speeches were given by Margaret Hodge, Minister for Culture, DCMS and Dave Prentis, UNISON General Secretary.

The Inquiry uncovered evidence of widespread cuts to jobs and services, re-organisation, new technology, including self service machines, increasing use of volunteers instead of trained staff, changes to work and service patterns and threats of privatisation facing some libraries.

Margaret Hodge, Minister for Culture pledged to keep a statutory library service, but warned of the future of free books without adequate funding.

Delegates highlighted the importance of the public library service, and supported UNISON's campaign to protect and save the public library service and our call for improved funding and resources. The Inquiry heard of the valuable role that libraries are playing in helping record numbers of people during the economic recovery.

At the event, UNISON presented results of an online survey of library staff which highlighted issues covering

inadequate staffing, lack of training for library professionals, cuts to training budgets and lack of consultation on changes to services.

Dave Prentis, UNISON General Secretary, said: "We are worried the agenda has already been written for libraries, but we will fight to save this historic service. Libraries are not just books, they are the hub of the community, providing free information, education, opportunity and entertainment for all." He added that: "We want a clear commitment to proper funding and consultation for the library service."

Delegates were encouraged to contact their MPs to sign the Early Day Motion 848 - Inquiry into the Public Library Service – which welcomes and supports UNISON's "Love Your Libraries" campaign.

More information from: www.unison.org.uk/localgov/pages_view_lib.asp?did=10705

UNISON will produce a report of the Inquiry, and it is hoped that this will help to shape the government's reform agenda on the future of the UK library service.

More on the 'Love your libraries' campaign is at <http://www.unison.org.uk/localgov/library.asp>

UNISON's report on the future of the library service can be downloaded free of charge from <http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/17301.pdf>

Local Library news

Wakefield Council- is carrying out a review of libraries. This follows the controversial closure of Flanshaw library at the end of last year, despite widespread opposition. Wakefield Council has now opted to set up a focus group rather than have an open public debate about the future of library services.

Belfast - a number of popular libraries in east Belfast face closures, if plans revealed by Libraries Northern Ireland are implemented. Under the plans, six libraries have been identified as unsustainable, and up to eight additional libraries could also close.

Privatisation News

ISTC contract terminated

The NHS is refusing to renew a contract for a controversial treatment centre which was paid for operations that were never carried out. Care UK, signed a 5-year contract to run Barlborough Treatment Centre, which runs out on 1 April. The centre offers procedures such as hip and knee operations.

The decision to end the contract was taken by health trusts including Nottingham, Notts, Doncaster, Sheffield, Derby, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire. The NHS pays Care UK a set amount regardless of the number of patients they treat. In the first six months of 2008/9 only £41,000 worth of procedures were taken up, despite £791,000 being paid.

PFI consortium set to sue

PFI firms have launched a £20m lawsuit against the Department of Health (DoH) and University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust over a cancelled PFI project.

The DoH cancelled the project because it “no longer represented value for taxpayers’ money” after costs rose from £711m to £921m. But Triskelion, a consortium of Laing O’Rourke, John Laing and Serco, has now launched legal proceedings to recover what it says are bidding costs.

Residents say “no” to BSF scheme

Residents and families in Stoke have rejected plans put forward by the council and drawn up by the private contractor Serco to reshape secondary education in the area.

If the plans go ahead, it will involve the closing of two schools and longer journeys for families to the proposed school sites.

Cardiff outsourcing threat

UNISON is fighting against controversial plans to outsource IT services in Cardiff. Cardiff Council plans to hand over the management of the city’s £10m IT services to the private Indian company, Tata. UNISON has complained that staff have not been consulted over the plans and is demanding a full consultation process to take place. Union officials have demanded to see the wording of the contract but council officials have refused on grounds of commercial confidentiality.

The controversial deal is the first phase of a major shakeup of the council, as it plans to work with a total of five private companies to deliver key services.

Private meals binned

Hundreds of meals are being thrown away daily at an NHS Hospital. The meals are provided by Medirest, part of the Compass Group UK, which won a £17m 5-year contract to supply patients’ meals in Southampton last year. Up to 400 meals are being binned because the food was about to go out of date.

NHS managers at Southampton General Hospital have admitted that they have problems with the service. The latest problems come after patients complained about meals turning up late or not at all and patients’ dietary requirements being ignored.

PFI hospital a ‘building disaster’

An MP has criticised the design of a £200m PFI hospital in Barking, Romford.

Margaret Hodge criticised the building for having nine miles of corridor which made it a “nightmare” to get around if you are sick or old. Also there are rooms without windows and fire doors that would be unmoveable for frail patients. The hospital opened in 2006, and was built by the PFI constructor Catalyst.

PFI leisure centre costs council

Rushcliffe Borough Council has agreed to bail out a privately run leisure centre for more than £2m.

The facilities, including a swimming pool, are well underused compared to others in the borough. Critics say private contractor Carillion did not do enough to publicise the centre and maximise its use by local people. Yet the firm has demanded more money from the council. If it had closed the centre it would still have been liable to pay Carillion until 2027.

PFI hospital not value for money

The PFI Worcestershire Royal Hospital, which opened in 2002 is not value for money, say critics.

The hospital cost £82m to build but will cost taxpayers a total of £720m. The Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust will make repayments to Catalyst (the firm responsible for maintaining the hospital building) at a rate of £24m a year; this includes a £7m a year mortgage and the costs of maintaining the hospital building to cover catering, security and portering services.

But it has been criticised for being too small and built on a site which was not convenient for residents.

Private home care services are failing

Bath and North Somerset Council – the privatisation of homecare services is to be investigated due to poor performance by private firms. The homecare service was outsourced to Agincare, B&NES Ltd, Caresouth, Way Ahead, Carewatch and Somerset Care private health providers. The public have complained about whether the services are meeting the needs of users and now a steering group made up of three councillors has been established to carry out a review of the homecare contract.

Waltham Forest Council has been forced to re-tender a home care contract due to the poor performance of the private firm, Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD). The firm was contracted to provide home care services to elderly and disabled people but has pulled out following a catalogue of complaints by users. They include vulnerable adults being left waiting for late or missed visits from carers, lack of continuity of care, neglect and a person who missed their medication. The council has a contract with two other providers, Housing 21 and Allied Healthcare, which will remain. But service users will still experience further disruption to their care until a contract is awarded to a replacement provider.

Calderdale Council's most vulnerable residents are being put at risk by the council's cash-saving decision to privatise home help. The council previously managed all homecare in the area but now responsibility is split between the council and six private companies. The council plans to cut £200,000 off its budget, but now carers are overworked and patients are not getting the attention and care they deserve and need. The changes to care provision means that some staff are working very long hours and some patients are being neglected.

Islington Council – Earlier this year the council ended a £1.5m homecare contract with Care UK following repeated problems with service provision. The council has also ended another contract with the private health provider Reliance Care, following the death of an elderly patient from "neglect." Islington Council and NHS Islington have now launched an enquiry into what went wrong.

SEND US YOUR STORIES!!

Contact Positively Public Briefing on **020 7551 1759** or email **Positivelypublic@unison.co.uk**

We have a million voices for public services – to add yours go to unison.org.uk/million or call 0845 355 0845 Textphone 0800 0 967 968