

**Health Sector Pay:
Pay Sub-Group 13th November 2008; Joint
National Committee 14th November 2008**

This is obviously a personal report, reflecting my own impressions of two meetings.

Back in April, Unite quite rightly rejected the three year NHS pay deal negotiated between the Government, Unison and RCN. A subsequent ballot of our Health Sector members gave a 95% vote to reject, with members also instructing the Union to proceed to a formal ballot on industrial action. Since then, Unite has organised a day of action against pay cuts, regional roads shows to build the campaign amongst Health Sector members, and produced high quality publicity and campaign material.

The industrial action ballot closed on 12th November. The results were good – ‘Yes’ votes for strike action and for industrial action short of strike action, in line with the recommendations from the Union. This outcome reflected the really excellent work done by Unite. The campaign material sent to reps was supplemented with letters, text messages and voice mails to members. The Union worked really hard to deliver the right outcome – and all credit to the lay activists and the officials at every level of the union who worked flat out to deliver the ‘Yes’ votes. This was a good campaign, with a good result.

However, organising to deliver a ‘Yes’ vote for action is just the first step in building a pay fight. The second step is what you do with that vote once you’ve got it.

The first meeting was a ‘four by four’ pay strategy meeting – four senior activists from the T&G and four from Amicus, meeting to review the results with Amicus National Officers for Health Dave Fleming and Karen Reay, and TGWU National Secretary Peter Allenson. All but one of the lay members were present. Dave outlined the results

– a 53% majority for strike action, and a three to one majority for action short of strike action. He said that the result was an achievement, it gave us the mandate we’d been looking for, it confirmed the rightness of the case we’d put, and made it far less likely that ‘elitist corridor deals’ could be struck again. The industrial action ballot across the public sector highlighted the need for the Government to review its public sector pay policy.

All of us agreed with this analysis. Dave also felt things had changed – the economy had slid into crisis since the Government imposed the three year pay award, zero per cent inflation could be on the cards, people might think themselves lucky they had a job at all, and the outcomes of other public sector pay ballots left them in a different position to us.

Dave went on to argue that the ballot result for strike action was too low to sustain strike action as things stood now. He proposed a one day ‘work to rule’ on 3rd December, combined with a parliamentary briefing to put our case to MPs, to be followed by a further meeting to decide next steps. He said this would be the beginning of the campaign, and we wouldn’t be walking away from it. By taking action within the 28 days, the mandate was kept alive.

There was a huge amount of debate around this position, with no consensus of opinion. I argued that we had a mandate for strike action. The economic crisis cut both ways – it could lead to members not wanting to fight, but people were also angry, as members could see that the money was there to bail out the bankers but wasn’t there when it came to fair pay for health workers. That gave us a window of opportunity to build a fight on pay. I talked about the potential for joint action with the PCS, with the PCS Executive meeting again on 27th November to decide if re-opened negotiations have met their objectives, and going for strike action if not. I said we should ask ourselves what Gordon Brown would want us to do – and then do the opposite. Brown didn’t

want strike action. A one day work to rule wouldn't deliver fair pay. We should move at least to a one day strike.

Many different views were expressed. One activist felt strike action wasn't achievable. Others felt it was, with different views about whether our case would be strengthened or weakened by delaying. There was real concern that a work to rule focusing on patient care only would just give us extra admin work the next day, and wouldn't give us a clear sense of where we going with the campaign. There was fear that it would be divisive, with each group of workers doing their own thing. However, people were also concerned that we shouldn't play our strongest card (strike action) first, and should hold our hand. Dave Fleming felt that we had to be wise and considered about what we were doing, and should retain the moral high ground.

The decision making meeting took place the following day, 14th November. This was a joint meeting of national committee members in Health from the Amicus and TGWU sections of the Union. My impression overall was of a greater determination from this meeting that we would need to take strike action in order to win this fight.

Many of the themes from the previous day were repeated, in a complex and sometimes challenging debate. Dave Fleming commented on the risk that employers could try and use the law to stop strike action, with a couple of lay members arguing that we couldn't allow the law to stop us defending members – and that lawyers in any event say what you pay them to say!

We represent a diverse membership, with different occupational groups having very different traditions. Many of the ambulance service members there, for example, were very confident about their ability to have an impact through even a brief work to rule, and confident that they could deliver strike action when we

need it. This was clear both from contributions made in the meeting and from informal discussion. Professional groups were probably overall less confident about the impact of a work to rule.

A few of us expressed the view that if strike action was needed it should be now. This did not reflect the overall mood of the meeting. There was concern that just before Christmas wasn't the best time for strike action. Some felt that we should keep the strike action mandate in our back pocket to be used later; others were frustrated by the lack of a clear plan to take us forward.

Several people – including me – put a resolution to the meeting welcoming the proposed day of action in December but calling for a named date for strike action in January. After two amendments and much discussion, the meeting resolved to progress the day of action on 3rd December, and to proceed to action up to and including strike action in January if the Government has not made necessary concessions. Our commitment to working with other unions remains. Our lay 'Occupational Advisory Committees' will agree how broader guidance on the day of action/ work to rule will be interpreted for the different groups we represent.

The task for activists now is to work hard to make the day of action on 3rd December a success. My own view is that we must also push hard for the strike action that we know will be necessary to overturn the Government's attacks on our pay. We have a mandate from our members. Let's use it.

Gill George
15th November 2008