

Wirral Unison Annual Report 2020/21

This year, as we know has been dominated by the Coronavirus pandemic. It has had a significant impact upon every one of us, in our personal lives and in our working lives. Many of you will have been working from home, some furloughed and a significant number have continued to work in the community, providing essential public services. Additionally, many of you will have volunteered to work on the Covid-19 support services such as the Food Hub and the PPE Hub.

Throughout this time Wirral Unison has sought to keep members informed of developments, and defend your interests; indeed, in a number of key areas we have improved conditions. We will take a moment to list some of the improvements achieved as a direct result of Wirral Unison pressure.

Real Living Wage for Care Workers

Additional funding has been secured to allow Care Providers to improve the wages of care workers; this took significant campaigning before the Council agreed and represented a major victory for Care Workers in Wirral. Sadly, not all providers have implemented this, but we will keep pressing.

Protection for the Clinically Vulnerable and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable

Across all employers, and not just where we have recognition agreements, we have agreed practical steps to ensure that members in these categories have had safety as the primary consideration in working arrangements.

Pay Rises Secured: Edsential, Magenta, Wirral Evolutions, Wirral Met College

Various campaigns, negotiations and representations led to achievement of pay rises in these four organisations. We also ensured that there was no financial detriment to Council staff who could not fulfil their normal working arrangements due to the pandemic.

No Compulsory Redundancies

We have secured a 'no compulsory redundancy agreement' with Wirral Council, however we have also applied this approach to other employers. At several Schools, both Council and academy, Barnston Court Nursing Home and Wirral Met College we saw off potential threats of compulsory redundancy. At Woodchurch Road where staff were faced with a 20% pay cut, members balloted for strike action. Following 100% vote for action on 100% turnout, management withdrew their proposals, temporarily at least.

Extension of Maternity Leave Provision

In July 2020 following a campaign, we secured an agreement with the Council that women returning from maternity leave would be eligible for an additional ten days leave. This recognised the significant impact lockdown has had on maternity leave, potentially effecting a mum's bond with her new baby as well as opportunities to attend parent & child classes and access peer support in the community. The agreement was initially for parents returning between 31 March 2020 and 31 December 2020 and due to further lockdowns, we pressed for and received an extension for parents returning up until 31 March 2021. We also ensured this provision was available to staff parenting through adoption.

End of Unpaid Leave

After 8 years we have secured the end of compulsory unpaid leave with the Council. This means many staff will see an extra 1% return to their wages from April. However, we have recognised the popularity

of Christmas shutdowns and these will continue in many areas; there will also be the chance to 'buy' additional leave, in effect a voluntary unpaid leave scheme.

Homeworking

We have negotiated with employers to ensure homeworking arrangements are safe and appropriate in the circumstances. For instance, we negotiated a 'give us what you can' approach in the Council. We have also been highlighting the additional costs in working from home. We know some will have saved on travel costs, but for many additional heating and electricity is substantially more and can be exacerbated for those with disabilities or who are home schooling. We are therefore pleased that after pressing this issue for some time the Council have agreed in principle to the payment of a Homeworking Allowance. The details will be discussed in the coming weeks.

Health and Safety

Branch Officers have spent a significant amount of time, often 'behind the scenes' discussing health and safety concerns with employers. This has been in small workplaces on behalf of individual members, or much larger employers about whole sections. We have discussed in some detail on collective or workplace risk assessments, and undertaken workplace inspections to consider the practical arrangements. Whilst we have not always agreed with management, but in many cases we have secured positive and safe outcomes. In a small number of cases that hasn't been possible. Where members have not felt safe, they have withdrawn from work under S44 of the Employment Relations Act; Wirral Unison have fully backed members in this situation.

We have supported many members with individual risk assessments, particularly important where people were more vulnerable to Covid-19. We have strengthened the framework of these assessments and have reached agreement that specific provision be made for those experiencing social deprivation or from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. We have also reached an understanding about having union reps present for discussions on individual risk assessments.

Organising in Social Care

Wirral Unison has made this sector one of our priorities this year. Alongside the success we have achieved in the funding of the Real Living Wage, we have also made progress in ensuring that full sick pay is available for Covid-19 related absence. Especially in the first months of the pandemic we were at the forefront of a successful campaign for appropriate PPE for Care Workers.

Engagement and Communication

As you will be aware, we have been emailing members regularly throughout this pandemic. For the first few months we were emailing daily, but latterly perhaps twice a week; we hope that these emails have been useful, the feedback we have received suggests so. We will continue to email regularly but perhaps once a week or fortnight once this pandemic has passed.

Additionally, we have been successful in our public facing communications. Our numerous press releases have resulted in substantial coverage in the Globe, Echo, Radio City and even national BBC TV. We have also held a number of public meetings online on various issues, that have been attended by hundreds and view by thousands.

This activity has resulted in the Branch having a much higher profile and has led to a significant increase in the size of our membership. Nearly 900 people have joined Wirral Unison in the past year; a net growth of over 8%. Alongside that we have recruited 21 new Stewards and 9 new Health and Safety Reps; that gives us a strong base to maintain our proactive work in the coming year.

In Memoriam

Unison has lost a number of members over the past year, both working and retired, and we remember them. Our Branch has also lost two of our key activists, Jane Edwards, a steward in the Library Services and Paul Wiggins, Retired Members Officer passed away last year. They will be fondly remembered and missed by many, including all at Wirral Unison.

Looking Forward: No Going Back to Normal

The past year has been terrible in many ways and we hope that in the coming months the global pandemic and health crisis will abate. It may be some time before all restrictions are set aside but we appear to be heading in the right direction. The question to be posed is 'What does a post pandemic, post Covid world look like?'

This government and previous governments have taken the general approach 'private good, public bad'. However, in this crisis that approach has failed; it is the public sector that has proved to be reliable, efficient and person centred. Jobs that have previously been treated with little if any respect, such as Cleaners and Care Workers, have now demonstrated their true worth.

There has of course been a financial cost to this crisis. The government have been right to drop budgetary rules, although they have perhaps been too generous with contracts and money awarded to friends and family. The question is who pays for this, and over what period is the debt paid off? We anticipate the Tories will try and make the working class, ordinary working families pay for this crisis. That is what happened with the 2008 banking crisis – remember public sector pay has been cut by over 20% in real terms since 2010. Meanwhile the wealthy prospered, their incomes increasing significantly. That was the lesson of Austerity.

After the Second World War the country said – we need something better! Despite the massive levels of debt (equivalent if not more than today's debt) this country created the NHS, enhanced the welfare state, built mass council houses, and wages increased. That shows what can be achieved out of a crisis.

We must be clear, we will not go back to normal we demand better!

Pay Freeze

In their first steps to make the public sector pay for the crisis, the Chancellor announced at the tail end of the year, a new public sector pay freeze. He made some exceptions for the NHS and allowed a small one off 'bonus' for the lowest paid. This is on the back of 10 years of pay austerity that has seen Council pay fall by 25% in real terms.

Government Ministers have stood on their doorsteps clapping key workers, and even produced a badge to show support for care workers. However, alone these are empty gestures. Wirral Unison will be at the forefront of campaigns for fair pay for public sector workers. Nationally a 10% pay claim has been submitted for Council staff, and we are about to draft a pay claim for Magenta.

'In-housing'

The privatised, contracted out method of providing services has too often proved to be a failure, and we believe that there should be a review of all outsourced services. Just over a year ago the Council brought Highways Services back in house, a successful move which can point the way.

Wirral Evolutions, (Adult Day Services) which was passed to a Council Owned Company has not had the success that was promised. Wirral Unison opposed the transfer at the time and warned that the proposals were flawed. With the company looking to reduce services we believe the time is now for

this important service to be returned to the Council. We have already made representations to the Council and will continue to do so. Other services including reablement and Social Work should also return to the Council.

Where the Council is contracting with outside companies, we strongly believe that any contracts should include protection for workers: the Real Living Wage, Trade Union Recognition and Full Sick Pay. Again, we will be pressing on this.

What Work Looks Like

The pandemic will leave an indelible print in many areas, some regrettable but we hope, some positive. For many, the way we work will change. This will be especially the case for what can be loosely termed 'office workers'. We know that many organisations were pushing 'hot-desking' before the pandemic; brushing aside concerns, in a rush to save money by reducing office space. Hot-desking has now disappeared with homeworking being posed as an alternative.

There are undoubtedly benefits to homeworking, for some workers at least; but for some there are significant downsides to working from home. There are many questions that are posed including work life balance, effective working, social isolation. We will be exploring all these issues in the coming months to ensure your interests are protected. We are running a homeworking survey at the moment, please do complete it. This will help us to face the future, but we are clear that your choice must be intrinsic to considerations.

Sick pay

At £95.85 a week Statutory Sick Pay is inadequate. If that wasn't always known, this crisis has highlighted the fact. Too many of our members do not have access to any contractual sick pay, so face real financial hardship if they are sick. No worker should have to choose between health and hardship not least care workers who support some of the most vulnerable in our society. We will be pressing the Council to fund full sick pay for care workers; it is the right thing to do.

Schools Funding

The (partial) closure of schools during parts of the last year has been regrettable but necessary. We are not blind to the impact of this upon the educational and overall development of many children, particularly in areas of social deprivation. Some steps have been taken to address this but not enough; not every child has been provided with a laptop, and even if they have not all households have broadband.

Schools and pupils will need additional support, especially after 10 years of cuts. However, far too many schools are in financial deficit, and some are looking at making support staff redundant. Now is not the time to be cutting staff and reducing support. Our members deserve better, and the children who have lived through this terrible crisis certainly deserve better.

In conclusion

A union is not just for a health crisis, but for every day you are at work. Wirral Unison will not disappear as we move out of this crisis. We will maintain our availability, focus our campaigning and continue to press for improvements on behalf of members. Can you help us? **If you want to be more active in our union, please email the Branch Office unison1@wirral.gov.uk.**

In Unison We Are Stronger.