University and College Union

Newsletter

East Midlands Retired Members Branch

No.49 November 2023

In this Newsletter

Please join the new Branch Facebook Group at:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/1077256209678817

Branch Meeting

Wednesday 21st February 2024, 10.30am

The Dickens Room
The Mechanics Institute
3 North Sherwood Street
Nottingham, NG1 4EZ

At 11.30:
Angie Mindel
"The Position in Palestine"

More information and news

can be obtained from these websites.

UCU National Website:
http://www.ucu.org.uk
AgeUK: http://www.ageuk.org.uk/
68 is too late: www.68istoolate.org.uk
National Pensioners Convention (NPC):
http://npcuk.org

Follow your branch:
Website: http://www.ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Twitter: @ucu-em-rmb
Please join the new Facebook Group at:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/1077256209678817

1. Loughborough College to join FE Strike

Notice of three days of strike action on 14th, 15th and 16th November has been sent to 29 colleges in the FE Respect campaign following the recent England-wide FE college ballot. Locally, the branches at **Loughborough** (97% 'Yes, 64% turnout) **Nottingham** (86%, 56%) easily passed the necessary threshold. The result has now precipitated a settlement at Nottingham College, while Loughborough remains in dispute and will be taking action, with pickets between 7.30 and 10am at Epinal Way and Radmoor Road.

An overwhelming 90% of staff who voted in the England-wide further education college ballot said they will back strike action over pay and conditions. Although many branches failed to meet the 50% turnout threshold, the results are nevertheless the most impressive the union has achieved since the 2016 anti-union laws were introduced. Those branches that fell short, in many cases by the odd percentage point or two, could be asked to re-ballot in the coming weeks. A further 13 branches have secured local agreements.

Currently, the Association of Colleges offer stands at 6.5%. There is a double-insult here. Firstly, 6.5% represents yet another real-terms pay cut, given inflationary pressures in the past year and does nothing to address the year-on-year decline in pay over many years which is now causing a recruitment and retention problem in the sector. Secondly, the AoC has no power to ensure colleges will honour even this miserly offer and there is now a long history of most failing to do so. UCU's claim is for an above-inflation pay rise, as well as a national workload agreement and a return to national bargaining, amid survey reports which reveal extensive and unsustainable levels of stress and illness in the sector, especially post-covid, as well as widespread use of food-banks. Indeed 96% of staff surveyed by UCU have said they are in financial difficulty. Meanwhile, executive pay continues to rise, with several principals now 'earning' over £300k.

As always urge our retired members to do what they can to support working branches in dispute, such as sending messages and attending picket lines..

Paul Wilkinson

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2. USS Pension Dispute Victory and HE pay and conditions

Our members in Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) institutions have voted to end the dispute with university employers over USS, the UK's largest private pension fund. Over 99% of the 19,000 UCU members who took part, voted to bring the dispute to an end after the employers' body UUK made an offer of 'full restoration'. The vote brings the dispute, which has seen a total of 69 days of strike action since 2018, to a close.

Pension benefits are now set to be restored by Monday 1 April 2024. This:

- reinstates the previous accrual rate of 1/75
- increases the defined benefit threshold from £40,000 back to where it would have been had changes not been implemented, at around £70,000
- removes the 2.5%pa cap on pension increases, before and after retirement, which will better protect pensions against inflation.

There will also be an additional one-off pension payment of around £900m to help make good the money members have lost since April 2022. The restoration and one-off payment mean an extra £16-£18bn will now go into pension pots. The agreement also paves the way for new contribution rates to be introduced as soon as January. This is likely to bring employee contributions down from 9.8% to 6.1%, putting more money into UCU members' pockets. The changes mean the typical USS member will be better off by around £150,000-£200,000 due to paying less into their pension and receiving much more throughout their retirement.

The changes reverse the 2022 cut, which slashed members' future guaranteed pensions by 35%. The restoration is the first time a UK union has achieved a reversal of a pension cut of this magnitude.

As the General Secretary says 'We hope this victory inspires other workers who have also seen their pension slashed. But we won't stop here - the same dedication that fuelled this pension fight is felt just as intensely when it comes to pay, workloads and job security. We will not stop until we create a higher education sector that properly values all its staff.'

It is worth noting, however, that this victory only restores USS benefits to where they were before 2022. Significant though the victory is for our working colleagues, it has, in fact, only reversed the last step in a series of cuts over the last decade or so. Hopefully, it will prevent further diminution of pension benefits but USS pensions will still be a long way short of what they were in 2011 and earlier.

In line with the determination to make similar strides on the pay and conditions dispute across the whole HE sector, at the time of writing, HE branches are reaching the end of the ballot period, which will help to determine the next steps on that dispute. The last stages of the timetable are:

Tuesday 31 October 2023: last 'safe' date to return the ballot by post

Friday 3 November 2023 (17:00): industrial action ballot closes.

STOP PRESS

On 6th November 2023 the results of the ballot were announced. 68% of members who voted supported taking strike action and 75% backed taking other forms of industrial action. However, trade union laws mean that despite the turnout being 43%, far higher than in May's local elections (32%), staff will be legally prevented from striking. More information can be found at https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13271/Anti-union-laws-stop-university-staff-striking-for-fair-pay--conditions.

Credit for information to www.ucu.org.uk

Rob Kirkwood

3. The Future of the State Pension

When Margaret Thatcher removed the commitment that the State Pension (SP) would rise in line with average wages, the SP percentage of average wages fell. The OECD analysis of 2017 gave an OECD average SP replacement value of 62.9% compared to 29.0% for Britain. The introduction of the triple lock was to halt this catastrophic fall. The latest figures show that the triple lock has improved the position but the recovery has not yet reached the pre Thatcher decision value. The British SP still remains amongst the lowest in Europe when compared to earnings.

In September the ONS confirmed that the uprating of the SP in April 2024 should be 8.5%. Steve Webb, a previous Pensions' Minister commented: "Although this will cost the Treasury more than £8 billion, it is worth remembering that the UK still has one of the lowest state pensions in the Western World and there is some way to go before the value of the pension recovers from a thirty year period when it was linked only to price inflation. This increase will simply keep the rise in the state pension in line with the pay increases that many in work have enjoyed".

However, the escalating cost of the State Pension is causing some to question whether the triple lock is sustainable in the long term. One financial journalist wrote:" One former Cabinet-level minister told me off the record that both Labour and Conservative would dearly love to ditch the "triple lock" but neither wants to be the first one to do it". Such a move before the election would be disastrous electorally; particularly for the Conservatives who have no wish to see Bournemouth go over to Bolshevism. However fiddling at the edges of the settlement is possible. The Financial Times reported that the Government is considering removing bonuses from the uprating, which could mean that State Pensions increase by 7.8% instead. The rationale is that this would strip out the impact of one-off payments made to NHS staff and civil servants in the summer to help settle pay disputes. It could also remove nearly £1bn from the pension bill. Labour has suggested that it will keep the triple lock for five years. It remains to be seen whether that pledge will be included in the manifesto for the next election.

Another approach was suggested at the Conservative Conference by Lord Frost who suggested that the state pension age should be raised to 75 to shrink public spending and the state. He said: "I do think that the honest truth is that the pension age is going to have to go up quite a long way to solve this problem [*of* *reducing public expenditure*]". He added: "People are much healthier than they used to be and I think it does need to go up. The big blocks of spending are health, pension and benefits. If you don't tackle those you're not really tackling anything. I do think you need to do something also like freezing – or coming close to freezing – the public sector health budget and finding a sort of socially just and accepted way that future spending needs to go to the private sector in some way otherwise it's just going to absorb sort of half of the budget before too long."

It is certainly true that raising the SP age for a future generation does not agitate existing pensioners to the same extent as a real terms decrease in their pension. Sadly the future generation often believes, like Peter Pan, it will never grow old.

The Health Foundation does not accept the Panglossian view that health is on a steady rise. "19% of the working-age population now report that they have a work-limiting health condition, compared with 15% in 2013 – an increase of almost a third (30%) – affecting how many people are able to participate in the labour market. Projections suggest that this is only set to continue growing over the coming decade, with the number of people aged 20–69 years living with a major illness in England alone projected to increase from 3 million in 2019 to 3.5 million by 2030. Over a similar period, improvements in mortality have stalled, leading to a downgrading of how long people are expected to live. Under 2008-based cohort life expectancy projections, a man aged 65 years in 2023 was expected to live on average 22.7 additional years. Under 2020-based assumptions, this has reduced to 20.0 years, a fall of 2.7 years and lower than expected under 2002-based estimates". (The Health Foundation "Health in 2040" July 2023)

Expert information gets scarce regard from those who are dedicated to reducing the welfare state and increasing their personal wealth. Post-election we will need to campaign hard to preserve the State Pension and the rest of the welfare state.

Julian Atkinson

4. Strikes and 'Minimum Service Levels' in Education?

Since the 1980s, following legislation of the Thatcher government, trade unions have been constrained with their capacity to take industrial action severely limited. With no right to strike in UK law, their right to withdraw labour is dependent on international agreements such as the European Convention of Human Rights – itself threatened by the Tories – and ILO Convention. Since 1906 the Trade Unions have been protected by immunity to tort, and been protected from being sued for losses by an employer or any other party impacted by the industrial action when the action was related to 'a trade dispute'. The cumulative impact of this Tory legislation has been to narrow what can be a trade dispute. Since the 1980s any industrial action has been related to a dispute with one's own employer, outlawing sympathy action, and required to be the result of a secret postal ballot. While initially suggested in Barbara Castle's **In Place of Strife**, Tory legislation also introduced the 'cooling off period', a period between the declaration of the ballot result and any industrial action taking place.

The current Conservative Government has attempted to tighten its grip. The **Trade Union Act (2016)** threshold for ballots, of minimum 50% turnout, has made industrial action even more difficult, especially in 'important public services' where at least 40% of those involved needed to vote in favour. The Act also extended the period of notice of industrial action after the ballot from 7 to 14 days. Importantly, what was referred to in the past as a 'cooling off period,' for bargaining to take place between employers and unions to avoid the industrial action, was now presented as the opportunity for employers to organise to continue without the strikers. Subsequent repeal of regulation by the government, that had prohibited the employment of temporary agency staff during strikes, a move not taken in 2016 because of opposition from the employment agencies themselves, will , according to the Department of Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy "give business impacted by strike action the freedom to tap into the services of employment businesses who can provide skilled, temporary agency staff at short notice to temporarily cover essential roles for the duration of the strike."

The government introduction of the **Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023** must be seen in this context. Not only is it designed to make calling strike action far more difficult, even after a legitimate ballot, it also increases dramatically the possibility of financial retribution against unions. One of the more hidden objectives of Tory legislation has been to bankrupt, or financially constrain, the ability of trade unions to perform their duties towards members.
Of course, in the UK and elsewhere, where there is any danger to 'life-and-limb' it has always been usual for unions to agree cover with employers, as in recent strikes in the NHS. However, under the new legislation, in the event of industrial action being called in key sectors, the Secretary of State can instigate a 'minimum service level' in the areas of 'important public service' where there are already tight ballot thresholds. Once this MSL is introduced by the relevant Secretary of State it is up to employers – with the suggestion this might be in consultation with the union – to draw up 'work notices' specifying who is required to work during the strike. According to the Act: "A work notice must not identify more people than are reasonably necessary for the purpose of providing the levels of service under the minimum service regulations." To avoid liability to tort, financial penalties for losses due to the strike, trade unions must "take reasonable steps to ensure compliance by its members with a work notice in relation to minimum service levels." So, trade unions are required to undermine the impact of the strike by denying the capacity to take part in the action by their members which has been supported in a ballot and called and is perfectly legal within even "the most draconian trade union legislation in Europe." It is not surprising that there are plans for trade unions to test the legality of this denial of the right to strike in court.

What is also unclear, and certainly due to be tested in the courts, is what is meant by 'reasonable' in this context. On 20th October it was announced that, in response to industrial action, Gillian Keegan, Secretary of State for Education was "inviting" education unions to proposals for a voluntary agreement on minimum service levels. If such a voluntary agreement cannot be reached then, she says, the government is committed to using powers granted through the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act. While unwilling to discuss the basis of the grievances underpinning the disputes, she commented that "I am asking the teaching unions to engage with us to put children and young people's education first – and above and beyond any dispute." When interviewed during the Tory Conference, Keegan made it quite clear that her conception of minimum service levels was the normal level of a full school timetable. This move by Keegan is not in the context of an immediate threat of strikes. All the unions accepted a pay offer of 6.5% in July - below the level of inflation. Perhaps this anticipates the realisation that the pay increase will have to come from existing school budgets rather than any new money.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary at school leaders' union NAHT, was angered by Keegan's announcement: "This is nothing short of an overtly hostile act from the government and an attack on the basic democratic freedoms of school leaders and teachers," adding that the plans were "utterly unworkable in a school setting. There are a range of very basic questions that the government seem to have not even considered, let alone are able to begin to answer." Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union, said: "The government would get further in minimising industrial action and disruption to schools if it engaged with unions on the issues that give rise to ballots. Gillian Keegan will be fully aware that unions including the NEU have comfortably passed voting thresholds designed never to be met, and on repeated occasions. Pay, workload and the recruitment and retention crisis will remain lightning rod issues for our members until the education secretary brings forward positive and substantial change."

The TUC conference in September passed a motion supporting mass opposition to the minimum service legislation "including a strategy of non-compliance and non-cooperation to make them unworkable." While there are no immediate plans for strikes in schools, disputes continue in Higher and Further Education. There are currently active ballots for industrial action in the health service, the railways, both covered by the minimum service level legislation. This is not to count the mounting grievances across all sectors of employment. It may be that we are building to a pitched battle between government and unions in the lead up to the election in 2024. Banners and placards might be out on the picket lines, with far more than the suggested 6 employees directly involved in the dispute and therefore unlawful under public order legislation on which the Tory government is also intent to enforce.

Alan Tuckman

5. The Problem with funded DB Pensions

The problems of funded Defined Benefit (DB) pensions such as the USS have not been all of their own making. Or, more precisely, all the fault of the pension trustees and their financial advisers. After the Maxwell scandal it was decided to make funded DB schemes safer. It did not turn out that way. Accounting regulations were changed by the Government so that such schemes had to match their assets with their liabilities. This was supposed to de-risk the schemes. It had the effect of making investment strategy turn away from long term high performing equities to "safer" products that often did not provide good returns. This had the potential of instituting another round of "caution" that threatened to put some schemes into a cycle of decline. This was to be avoided by slashing the future benefits of those in the pension scheme.

"LDI" (liability-driven investing) products aimed to help a DB pension scheme "match" its assets with its liabilities, and to invest in a way that focuses on the scheme's liabilities, rather than just the scheme's assets. The closest match for the risks associated with the value of the liabilities is long-term gilts, particularly those linked to inflation. The Pensions Regulator estimated late last year that about 60% of DB schemes have invested in LDI products in one form or another. Defined benefit pension schemes were encouraged to adopt LDI products by the Pensions Regulator (TPR).

In September 2022 the Truss crisis came about - many pension schemes did not have sufficient liquid assets to meet their provider's calls to increase the "cushion" referred to in a Bank of England letter issued at the time. Many pension schemes struggled to find the required cash in such a short timescale and this also meant that many had to sell gilts, thereby reducing their value further. As gilts prices fell, there was a risk of the entire cushion being eroded; leaving the LDI fund with zero net asset value. Whilst the pensions industry had looked previously at what level of economic shock the LDI market could withstand, the Regulator has since commented that the mini-budget caused an "extraordinary shock", which was much broader than anything the Regulator had expected or thought plausible. The aggregate value of DB pension sector assets dropped by £591bn, or 32 per cent, last year to £1.23tn by the end of December, according to the Office for National Statistics.

The Truss crisis was not the only difficulty. The continuing back drop was the accountancy regulations. The Industry and Regulators Committee of the House made some very revealing comments : "The evidence we heard overwhelmingly suggests that the use of LDI strategies caused the Bank of England intervention. If it were not for the use of leveraged LDI, then it is likely there would only have been some volatility and a market correction, rather than a downward spiral in government debt markets that threatened the UK's financial stability and led to significant losses as pension fund assets had to be sold in order to meet LDI liquidity requirements.

The impacts of accounting standards and the widespread adoption of leveraged LDI have transformed pension schemes from being long-term institutions into ones focused mainly on short-term volatility in prices and interest rates.

We are calling for regulators to introduce greater control and oversight of the use of borrowing in LDI strategies and for the Government to assess whether the UK's accounting standards are appropriate for the long-term investment strategies that are expected of pension schemes. This will help ensure that the turbulence that followed the September 2022 fiscal statement doesn't happen again." The report also called on the government to pause the introduction from next April of new rules affecting the funding of DB pension schemes until a full assessment of their impact was completed. The new funding code is expected to force DB schemes to raise holdings of low-risk assets, such as bonds, while also reducing investments in equities.

Stephen Timms, chair of the committee, made very critical comments about the role of the TPR and argued that the accounting regulations had been a major component of the problems of funded DB schemes. It seems that the Government experts introduced the very instability that they thought they were avoiding. The benefits owing to our members in the USS should never have been threatened. The real culprit for pension difficulties was Government plus an incompetent Pensions Regulator.

Julian Atkinson

6. Reports from the East Midlands Regional Committee

Report from the East Midlands HE Sector Committee meeting held online on 30 September 2023

The discussion was dominated by the HE sector dispute, and in particular, the decision to let individual branches opt out of the strike action planned for September. DMU was not represented at the meeting and NTU is not currently part of the national bargaining structures, but all the others reported that their respective Branches had voted not to take part in the action. Most branches felt that the marking and assessment boycott had damaged morale, in part because it fragmented the action and exposed members of staff to punitive action by employers. Branches also reported that they found it difficult to motivate their members to vote for further action. The HEC member present was asked directly to what extent factional infighting may have been an issue in the changes to strategy and tactics, but the question did not get a clear answer. Instead, it appeared that a ballot should have taken place over the summer, but that had not happened, and no explanation had been offered. The next meeting of the HEC would be on 6 October.
Local issues continued in all branches, where much work focused on workloads and anti-casualisation.

Report from the East Midlands Regional Committee

The FE Sector reported that 60 colleges were being balloted. The ballot was disaggregated, but any action would be coordinated nationally. The focus currently was to get the vote out.
There was some discussion as to what training could be offered to attract greater attendance from Branches, and suggestions ranged from training on the marking and assessment boycott, to basic introduction to employment law, or on characteristics protected by law.

Harry Ziegler

7. Refugees and Asylum Seekers

<u>Who do we think we are ??</u>
Thoughts on Refugees and Asylum Seekers.

Where did our ancestors come from? Surely on this island so close, but often independent of Europe, we must all be descendants of migrants from various backgrounds including invaders and asylum seekers of many eras. For example, my own grandfather's ancestors were Huguenot refugees from Europe before becoming Nottingham Lace Makers. And, surely in our own lifetimes, we have seen many different groups of people arriving here to escape persecution and war.

I remember Hungarians being temporarily housed in Donington Hall, in Donington Park, Ugandan Asians whose children I taught in secondary school in Loughborough, and of course several generations of Polish families who were housed on former RAF bases in this area.

So now we are faced with large groups of Asylum seekers again, who need our support. In the village where I live: Kegworth, where we had our last UCU East Midlands retired Members meeting, a local hotel is currently housing many young men. While there have been some hostile demonstrations against them, other local people have been very supportive. Currently they are being offered English classes, formal and informal, now also including ESOL qualifications, work experience in charity shops and other activities.

I personally have participated in a very small way in informal "English Conversation" with some very small groups which I have found both interesting and enlightening. Hearing from someone who has actually travelled for more than two years around the Mediterranean from East Africa and Sudan before eventually, dangerously crossing the Channel in a small boat, brings it all only too much to life.

Some topics we have talked about have been fun , such as British Wild Life - one young man had seen a hedgehog in the hotel grounds - but didn't know what hedges or hogs are, so another showed me a photo of a porcupine on his mobile phone!

However, apparently other European countries such as Italy and even Germany have now become overwhelmed with such migrants which is obviously now a very major problem needing serious national and international solutions which I feel we should not be trying to pass on to other less affluent places.

Rowena Dawson

8. The Crisis in Health and Social Care

Satisfaction with the NHS and social care is at its lowest since the British Social Attitudes Survey began in 1983, at 29 percent and 14 percent respectively.[1] It is therefore to be expected that they emerge as one of the battle grounds in the next general election. Dissatisfaction with the NHS is driven by waiting times for appointments with GPs and in hospitals, staffing levels, and a view that the Government provides insufficient funds for an at least adequate service. For social care, the issues are availability, pay, working conditions, and training for carers being inadequate, and the lack of support for unpaid carers. In a sense, none of these are new issues, but they have been aggravated through Brexit and the management of Covid.

In international comparison, the UK has fairly low number of doctors per 1000 of the population (2.8). According to the *BMJ*, the UK ranks 22 out of 33 OECD countries which provided data.[2] The only two European countries with fewer doctors are Poland and Slovenia. This is despite the fact that the number of doctors in the UK has been growing at a faster rate than the population at large. As Britain is also an ageing society, demand for medical services continues to grow. Already before Covid and Brexit, Britain had fewer hospital beds than the EU15 average (2.7 compared to 4.5), and fewer nurses (8.2 compared to 9.4).[3] The current rate of nursing vacancies stands at nearly 12 percent.[4] GPs feel overwhelmed and are leaving the profession, not only in the upper age range, but also those under 30. According to *Pulse*, a publication for health professionals, 1 in 5 GPs in that age range left the profession in 2022.

Unsustainable workloads seem to be one of the main drivers of this trend.
It is not immediately clear how the staffing situation can be addressed quickly, but Wes Streeting's notion, supported by the Labour leadership, that the private sector will help, seems to be fanciful. Operose Health, a UK subsidiary of the US health insurer Centene, has been buying up GP practices based on a rule change introduced in 2007 and is now one of the biggest GP chains. The BBC reported last year on how Operose operates,[5] and *The Guardian* also covered the issue.[6] Both suggested that Operose prioritis profit and in the process put patients' safety at risk.

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1 https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/public-satisfaction-with-the-nhs-and-social-care-in-2022-results-from-the-british-social-attitudes-survey

2 https://www.bmj.com/content/357/bmj.j2940

3 https://www.health.org.uk/chart/chart-how-does-the-uk-compare-internationally-for-health-funding-staffing-and-hospital-beds

4 https://www.nurses.co.uk/blog/stats-and-facts-uk-nursing-social-care-and-healthcare

5 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-61759641

6 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/13/britains-biggest-chain-of-gp-surgeries-accused-of-profiteering

Although it is accurate that the Government does not spend enough on healthcare, that is not the only issue affecting funding. It has gone very quiet over the PFI "deals" which were forced on hospital trusts in the last thirty years. According to *The Guardian*, "an initial £13bn of private sector-funded investment in new hospitals will end up costing the NHS in England a staggering £80bn by the time all contracts come to an end…",[7] and last year, hospital trusts were spending £457 million on interest payments alone. Because PFI companies were given guarantees (so much for the "risk taking" of the "wealth creating" private sector), trusts can cut expenditure on staff, equipment, and other capital projects, but not on PFI payments. Furthermore, the payments are linked to the rate of inflation so that they will increase substantially. We need not rehearse the arguments that the "private" sector draws on the same staff base as the NHS and does not offer additional resources.
Social care, a bigger employer than the NHS, is even worse off as the Cinderella service. Various commissions and inquiries over the last 25 years have stated quite clearly that adult social care is underfunded, but governments of all stripes have refused to grasp the nettle and increase funding to what would be necessary. Currently, adult social care is provided by approximately 17,000 private firms, but it is mostly paid for by local authorities (representing roughly forty percent of their spending). Private patients are charged more, subsidising in effect those paid for by LAs. According to *East Anglia Bylines*, "… 1.6 million people who have been assessed as needing care are not getting it."[8] In part, this is because the number of unfilled posts in adult social care is even higher than in nursing. In August 2023, there were 165,000 vacancies. (This affects of course also the NHS as people who no longer need care in hospitals cannot be discharged and are therefore "blocking" beds.) The House of Commons Library published a research briefing on the social care workforce last August. The sector faces rising demand, high vacancy rates and staff turnover (around 30% in a year), indicative of low morale and burnout, low pay, and little opportunity for career progression. The Government's White Paper, *People at the Heart of Care*, addressed some of the issues but not pay and not insufficient funding for training and development. (England differs from devolved administrations in the UK in that the workforce is largely unregulated.) This situation largely explains that social care is not an occupation of choice and that people working in the sector will leave when other sectors of the economy are looking for workers. Without substantial new funding, the situation is unlikely to improve, and a recent *Guardian* editorial opined that "…the combination of rising social care and housing costs is driving numerous councils towards bankruptcy … If the UK wants public services that are fit for the 21st century, it will have to invest in them and crucially in the people who work in them." (31 October 2023) The Health and Social Care Committee of the Commons broadly agrees when it reports that low pay "devalues social care workers…, is a factor in high turnover rates and high number of vacancies; and as a result, undermines the quality and long-term sustainability of social care."[9]

Although burnout is mentioned in the context of working in health and social care, this is attributed mainly to the stresses and strains caused by understaffing. What is not really discussed, is that cognitive dissonance is a major factor in burnout. It can be caused by the way in which work is structured, makes the workers feel that they cannot care for their patients (e.g., 15-minute appointments for domiciliary care). Caring involves what Hochschild (1983) called emotional labour whereby workers are expected to act and feel in ways which meet organisational demands. It is work more frequently demanded of women so that there is also a gendered aspect to the work which the discussion does not acknowledge. More funding may be necessary and a start, but maybe we should also get the people doing the work involved in shaping it and the conditions under which they work.

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[7] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/12/nhs-hospital-trusts-to-pay-out-further-55bn-under-pfi-scheme

[8] https://eastangliabylines.co.uk/johnsons-social-care-plan-is-inadequate/

[9] Foster, D. (2023) *Adult Social Care Workforce in England* Briefing Paper 9615, London: House of Commons Library (https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9615/CBP-9615.pdf)

Harry Ziegler

9. Climate Crisis Talk

Our recent RMB branch meeting in Kegworth was treated to an important and thought-provoking talk, followed by lively discussion, on the climate crisis. Former Nottingham South MP, Alan Simpson, now a prominent climate campaigner, warned us of the immediacy of this crisis and the relative failure of successive British governments in tackling it.

Alan pointed out that short-term political thinking, linked to the parliamentary cycle, cannot be the way to combat global warming as these solutions will take the kind of long-term planning and financial commitments that short-term governments are loathe to do. In contrast, before being conquered by 'civilisation' the Iroquois tribes of Northern America would share all surpluses to avoid both waste and want. They would set any decisions against an assessment of their impact over the next seven generations (!), and all these decisions would have to be endorsed at tribal level – and only by women. We could learn a lot! By way of example Alan pointed to the madness of 35,000 annual 'ghost flights' which throw millions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere simply to enable airlines to keep hold of preferential landing slots.

Thankfully, some European countries are making laudable progress in some aspects of dealing with the climate crisis. Sadly, the UK remains far behind. Norway, for example, manages to recycle 97% of its plastic bottles via a simple return scheme. The UK recycles less than 20%. While the UK continues to hurtle down the pathway of privatised energy companies whose primary purpose is to satisfy their shareholders Europe has several examples of localised, municipal energy production which is directly responsible to the local community. Municipal energy companies were more common in the UK in the 19th century! Indeed, the first of these, The Manchester municipal energy company which was formed in 1817 diverted profits for the development of the city's parks and gardens over an 80-year period. Indeed in 1947 50% of local authority income came from municipal ownership of energy. The figure is now less than 5%. The recent experience of Nottingham's Robin Hood Energy company which collapsed with losses amounting to around £30m demonstrated how the market is rigged in favour the big suppliers and distributors. Denmark, meanwhile, has made it illegal for profit to be made from energy production and distribution. The UK is a long way behind many other European nations when it comes to house insulation, too. With little social housing left in the UK the 'solutions' are again being largely left to market forces and private interests. Were energy saving schemes are proposed they are often offered as individualised means-tested grants. Germany, by contrast, has embarked on a state-funded nationwide system of retro-fitting houses.

These examples demonstrate that there are solutions that can be achieved through a combination of state intervention and local initiatives. The UK approach has been sadly lacking. The current government is committed to opening new oil and gas fields as it continues to laud the 'virtue' of nuclear power and prefers to favour carbon capture rather than carbon reduction. So-called carbon offsetting schemes, as we already know, are ineffective. Other schemes, such as the extraction of thermal energy from old mines, receive little support.
Widening the picture further, Alan pointed to the need for enormous shifts in capital required from so-called developed to less

developed parts of the world as well as the prospect of unimaginable levels of migration. Alan remains optimistic that we have the means to tackle this crisis, but we must generate the political change and will to do so, and to do so urgently..
Alan ended his talk with the observation that Storm Babet - its ferocity an expression of climate change, was on its way. Two days later, many parts of the UK were under water.

Paul Wilkinson

10. UCU Retired Members Branch

See how to join our Branch Facebook group, as detailed in the information section on Page 1.

Our branch has been meeting since 2008 and now has well over 300 members. Our aims are listed below. We meet three times a year, often in places of interest to make part of a day out. Meetings focus on important issues for UCU pensioners and provide a chance to talk with other retired members.

A termly newsletter with articles of interest to retired UCU members is e-mailed to all branch members for whom we have addresses and to UCU branch secretaries in the East Midlands and to other RMBs.

Please let us have your personal e-mail address and let us know if it changes.

RMB Roles and Functions

- To represent the interests of retired members within the union.
- To represent the interests of retired union members within the wider union and pensioner movements.
- To provide a forum within the union for retired members to come together to consider and debate matters of mutual interest.
- To provide a resource of collective memory, advice and expertise in support of the union, in particular to those still in active employment.
- To provide active support, where appropriate, by involving the broadest section of the branch in support of the wider interests of the union and its members, including support for those still in active employment.

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