SERCO DISPUTE LATEST (20 September 2017)

On 13 September, reps from the three UNISON branches in Barts Health lobbied the Trust AGM at Stratford Town Hall. We submitted our appeal to Ian Peters, Trust Chair, where we express our serious concern over claims that the staff pay in the contract with Serco is based on the London Living Wage, that funding for pay in the coming years would not include Agenda for Change. This would mean serious underfunding and leave staff significantly worse off. Our appeal ends with a request to the Trust Board to review this and confirm the actual position. Although up to 20 supporters of the Unite strike were present outside the town hall, the actual organisers of the strike were conspicuous by their absence. The word about was that Unite had already ended their strike. We didn’t know the exact terms of settlement but they were said to have “nothing to do with a payrise”.

In the afternoon of 19 September, we received confirmed details of Serco’s latest offer, which Unite was asking its members to accept. Although Unite’s national website remained silent (as it was when the strike was suspended at the end of August), an article published by the Socialist Party (google “Socialist Party 26148”) announced Unite’s acceptance of Serco’s offer on the same day.

Continuing with the SP’s track record of misinformation throughout the dispute (e.g. famously claiming Serco made £82m of profits in 2016 whereas they actually incurred a loss), the article hides the inconvenient fact that the “non-consolidated lump sum payment” which their “negotiators managed to increase” from Serco is to be funded from the consolidated uplift in spine points and London Weighting (HCAS) which UNISON got Serco to agree to pay back on 17 July—Serco refers to this in their 25 August update: “…we have offered an additional increase to include an uplift of 1% on the HCAS (covering 868 employees) and a spine point uplift for eligible employees (a further 219).”

In other words, instead of supporting UNISON’s proposal, which Serco had agreed to already on 17 July, giving most workers in Serco a consolidated rise that will stay in their pay package, Unite has asked Serco to “share” this money as a… one-off “bonus”. Even in the worst days of the PFI-induced deficit in Barts Health, AfC was never butchered like this.

Yes, Unite has indeed asked Serco to go back to their original position at the end of June, when they announced their wish to freeze spine points and the London Weighting at 16/17 levels. Yes, Unite is asking their members who used to have AfC to give it up for a “one-off bonus” of about a couple of days’ wages (or less). Yes, after a complete abandonment of its ill-conceived 30p claim, Unite has asked its members to accept a pay cut.

UNISON will not support this scandalous proposal. We will campaign hard to argue, as we have consistently done, that it is in the best interests of the workforce to remain on AfC and to have the 17/18 AfC pay award in full. We will persist with our fight to end the two-tier workforce, by getting everyone onto AfC. We will be balloting our members with the recommendation to reject the Unite proposal and accept the 17 July formal offer we received from Serco (which also include a review of their HR policies and procedures). We will be explaining the differences between the two proposals to all workers.

The reader may wonder why Unite’s Barts branch has stubbornly refused our invitations to form a joint claim on the basis of the defence and extension of AfC? This is the same question we had, and we found the answer to this in the SP article mentioned above.
Apart from a highly selective description of their proposed settlement (readers should know that regardless of what the SP claims, this latest “offer” they have concocted can only be implemented with the agreement of both Unite and UNISON), most of the SP article is spent on justifying its hostile split from UNISON at Barts Health. Its blind sectarianism has led it into pushing a risible deal which could fatally undermine AfC and hurt the entire workforce at Barts Health.

2018/19 NHS Pay Claim

On a brighter note, on 15 September, on behalf of the 13 other NHS trade unions (including Unite), UNISON wrote to the Chancellor Philip Hammond, urging him to earmark funds in the November Budget for a pay rise in line with inflation (RPI), currently at 3.9%, and an additional consolidated £800 lump sum for all staff—to restore some of the lost earnings missed out in the last six years of the pay cap.

We’d like to remind the reader that the worsening crisis of cuts in the NHS will not end until we have a Labour government that commits to ending the austerity agenda for good. As we have commented in our July and August issues, instead of Unite Barts branch’s mistaken line that Serco workers should seek “a bigger share” of their profits (and indeed losses), the correct route is to challenge the austerity agenda, get the Trust to budget for AfC, and fight to get all NHS workers to have AfC.

Patient Transport back in-house

From 1 October, around 250 patient transport staff hired by ERS will be brought back into Trust employment. With ERS utterly failing in delivering proper standards (which we warned the Trust about) and no bidders for the contract, the Trust had to bring the service back in-house. The Trust has agreed to convert those staff members who are not on AfC into it over a 12-month period. This will be a significant improvement in pay and benefits, and an end to the injustice of workers doing the same jobs divided by different terms and conditions. We will monitor the situation and play our part in working towards a patient transport service that we can be proud of.

Job Evaluation

Using the non-availability of trained union reps as the excuse, the Trust has also contracted a private company to band posts. Again, the Trust hasn’t responded to our questions about its legality, costs and how many posts have been thus evaluated. We think it is the Trust’s responsibility to ensure union reps have the paid time release they need to be JE trained, and to attend JE panels. We are seeking legal advice and will act accordingly.

Blue Chip

“Blue Chip” is an outfit that claims to be ‘a new breed of Trade Union’. However, it is not a recognised trade union in Barts Health. It cannot take part in collective bargaining, nor can it represent employees at formal meetings (such as grievance and disciplinary hearings). As an unrecognised organisation, Blue Chip can only sit at formal meetings in a supportive capacity (i.e. it cannot act on behalf of employees) and may attend collective meetings as an observer only. Buyer beware!