

KEY WORKERS UNITED

Norwich No 8, September 2021

FOR A NATIONAL PUBLICLY-OWNED SOCIAL CARE SERVICE!

THE TORY GOVERNMENT has made its long-awaited announcement on 'reform' of social care, but amidst all the agonising about the costs, there was **no mention at all** of how to reward and support workers in the sector. Care workers are amongst the lowest-paid and least-supported in the country, despite being in the forefront of the Covid-19 pandemic for which several hundred paid with their lives. North Norfolk Trade Union Council has

launched a Good Practice Charter for workers in social care, as the foundation for a campaign to achieve justice on pay, working conditions and training for these vital staff.

WHAT THE CHARTER SAYS

The Charter calls for a living wage (the present average hourly rate is £8.67), paid travel time, realistic time to carry out duties, parity with health care workers, a real commitment to training and health

and safety, and trade union membership. There are **112,000** vacancies in the industry, with some 430,000 people leaving every year. 1.54 million people work in social care with some 17,700 organisations providing or organising at some 39,000 establishments.

For more information contact North Norfolk Trade Union Council Secretary Martin Booth via email at mbooth0853@outlook.com

BY A NORWICH CARE WORKER

CARE WORK should be one of the most rewarding jobs a person could do. Unfortunately in our society it is often one of the worst. Below are some of my thoughts and experiences from working for 16 years in social care.

During my first few years working in care I was employed by Social Services. Wages were not great but they tended to be better than in the private sector. Staff also had access to the local government pension scheme. Staff were encouraged to attend numerous training courses to improve their work practice. The council even paid for me to attend a three-day swimming life-saver course so that I could safely take service users swimming.

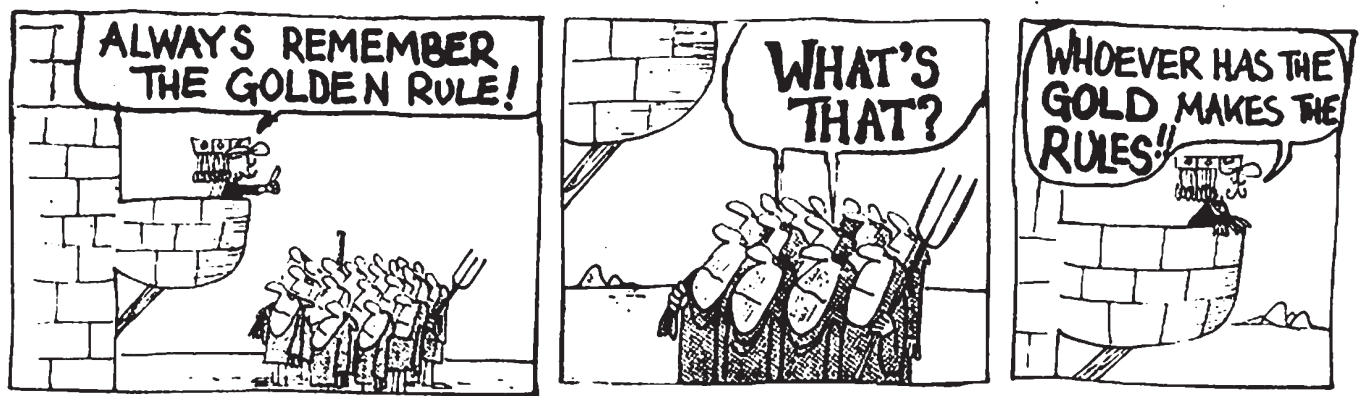
Unison was the recognised union at the county council. After a fight for equal pay, many care workers received several thousand pounds in back pay. This was due to the fact that care work, which is predominantly undertaken by women and often women of colour, was paid less than other jobs of equal skill.

After the coalition government came to power in 2010 they were determined to force councils to outsource social care to save money. I was no longer employed by the council but by a social enterprise. This resulted in a two-tier workforce. New staff were put in the inferior Nest pension scheme. Holiday entitlement was cut and pay was cut to the minimum wage.

Things got even worse when I became an agency carer. Often my shifts were cancelled on the way to work. Sometimes I was lucky to be offered one shift a week. The use of casual contracts is often the preferred employment practice by employers now. Wages are rarely above the minimum wage and there are an estimated 100,000 job vacancies in social care. If supply and demand actually worked, care wages would rise until these vacancies were filled.

A toxic combination of low wages, staff shortages and poor training means that carers can rarely provide the standard of care they would like to. Stress levels can be unbearable. It is often a challenge in care homes to keep all residents safe. Care managers are under pressure to respond by denying problems. In my experience, managers have claimed there are no staff shortages, putting pressure on the carers to work harder. If staff are stressed they will be offered six free counselling sessions to build 'resilience'. Thus blame is placed on individual care workers when they cannot cope with unbearable pressure.

It is very clear that care is not a priority and is instead seen as a burden under capitalism. This situation will only get worse with an aging population. Our fight is to build a better world where care is central to all we do.



BOOK REVIEW

Ben Phillips @BenPhillips76 has written what I found to be an inspiring book ***How to Fight Inequality and Why that Fight Needs You.***

IT'S FULL of quotes that inspire and get to the heart of the matter, for example "The change we need won't be given to people, it will be fought for by people". The first part chronicles the damages inequality does to all in society by increasing crime, decreasing trust, and the exacerbation of inequalities of race and gender.

Then he identifies when the fight to reduce inequality has been successful - in Latin America from around 2000 to 2010/15 and earlier on, in the first 2/3 of the 20th century in North America and Europe. From the 1930s to the 1960s the US marginal tax rate on the super-rich ranged from 70% to nearly 95%. During the same period, the rise of people joining unions correlates with the reduction in inequality. And he points out that the process requires long-term organising, and isn't free from conflict. Most of the civil rights leaders lauded today were considered troublemakers, radicals, in their time.

His idea for how we change government's agenda is threefold: overcome deference, build power together, and create a new story. Overcoming deference is about being unpopular, and labelled as

disruptive. Extinction Rebellion protests are being policed with increasing aggression, and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is set to make this the default. Zambian musician and human rights activist Pilato is quoted: "it is not only the perpetrators who defend the status quo - many ordinary people do too, and those who go against the social norms are treated as outlaws".

As trade unionists we know the power of organising. Of finding a key issue and building from that, extending the campaign and so growing the movement. The movement will need to encompass different groups. Phillips quotes Emad Emam, an academic and development campaigner: "Fragmentation is how we are kept vulnerable". Unite Community extends trade union membership to the unemployed and IWGB aims to organise workers in the gig economy. Faith groups are also key to extending a movement.

Finally, creating a new story. We know that socialism is about hope and optimism. It will be hard, but it's been done before. And creative ways of telling the stories will reach more people. In Norwich the Common Lot theatre group tell of Norfolk's radical past through humour & song. Phillips mentions an Irish saying: "History is written by the rulers, but the sufferers write the songs, and in the end the music wins!" There is hope: we will need to overcome ideological differences and unite across groups, but together we can bring the change that's needed.

Rachel Henderson (UCU)

SHORT CHANGED

SHOULDN'T WORKERS get paid for all of the time they are at work? Of course they should! But say you work on a till here. Your shift ends at 6pm - the same time as the store closes, yet customers are allowed in until 6pm to make a purchase. So your till must remain open until the last customer leaves and you are not allowed to leave your till until the cash is removed by a supervisor. You do not get paid for the time all this all takes. You used to - it was 30mins, it got cut a few years ago to 15mins but after the store opened following the first lockdown, cashing up time was in your time.

A similar situation exists at the start of a shift if you work on a till. Your shift starts at 9am - the same time as the store opens but staff are encouraged to be on duty a few minutes early, unpaid, in order to get the cash float and other admin sorted before 9am. Paid

tea breaks were largely abolished before the pandemic by reducing shift lengths for part time staff, who make up the majority of workers, to 4 or 4 and a half hours so that they don't qualify. Now shifts have been reduced even further, to 3 or 3 and half hours so that part timers need to work more days in a week which involves extra travel and getting ready time.

In these KWU leaflets I have written how shop workers here were not given the respect they deserved during the pandemic, but also how when it suited the company they could sack staff using the furlough scheme as a disguise and then hire new workers, push through unfair disciplinary measures and work practices, individualise blame, and make staff use phone apps to get their shift times and read other information in their own time. Clearly the pandemic has been cynically used by the company as an opportunity to increase exploitation and control the workforce.

Attila the shelf stacker



Boris Johnson sent packing after he says Thatcher was a climate campaigner when she decimated the coal industry.