# TowerPower

The News Sheet of Tower Hamlets UNISON

December 2024 No 336


*Season's greetings to all our members*

# 2024: A YEAR OF EQUALITIES

**As the year draws to a close so does UNISON's year of the LGBT+ worker. In Tower Hamlets we can be confident that it has been a stunning success and one of our best equality focused years yet.**

Many new activists have been recruited and a number of profile-raising events have been held over the last twelve months, including the Branch's first ever delegation to London Trans+ Pride.

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# ...and a year of international solidarity




**As the Israeli state's brutal scorched earth bombardment of Gaza continued throughout 2024 and spread into Lebanon, UNISON members were relentless in calling for a ceasefire, continued to mobilise to protest at what the International Court of Justice has ruled may be plausible genocide and demanded that arms sales to Israel stop.**

Workplace Days of Action called by the Stop the War Coalition were observed, solidarity was taken to the Queen Mary University Student encampment and a campaign has recently been launched to demand that the council divests the Tower Hamlets Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) from any companies profiting from human rights abuses of the Palestinians and from fossil fuels.

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# NJC PAY CLAIM SETTLED

**NJC pay for council and school workers has been agreed, with UNISON pressing employers to pay the arrears and implement the award asap. Most members should receive this in their November pay in time for Christmas. The settlement for Inner London is £1575 consolidated on all pay scales from 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025. As usual it will be pro rata for part time and term time only staff and back dated to 1st April.**

Over the autumn UNISON balloted members on the employers' offer, and while there was a majority YES vote for industrial action unfortunately, we did not meet the required turnout threshold of 50% in enough larger employers to enable strike action that would result in an improved pay offer. The NJC Committee took the decision that, in light of these results, the dispute should be settled. It will be a disappointing outcome for many members as the employers' pay offer falls well short of what we deserve in the middle of a cost of living crisis.

## Tower Hamlets

In Tower Hamlets activists worked hard across schools and council sites to turn out the vote, and the Branch held brilliantly attended pay meetings. Over 200 members attended the main hybrid meeting in the council chamber and a well-attended Zoom meeting for school members generated lively discussion. Whilst we did not hit the required 50% threshold, our Branch (which had the largest ballot pool in Greater London so had the hardest hill to climb) delivered more votes than any other Branch in the Region, which is no easy task and must be viewed as a positive sign of our ability to organise. Attention now turns to building next year's pay campaign.

**But importantly, with a new government in power, it's time to hold Labour's feet to the fire about changing the anti-union laws which have severely hindered our ability to fight for fair pay since 2017(see page 7).**



Brilliant branch meeting on pay.

# Best Value Inspection – UNISON's view

### by Branch Secretary, Kerie Anne

**Arch-tory Michael Gove's decision back in mid-February to impose a Best Value Inspection on Tower Hamlets might be considered ironic considering the Tory government's penchant for handing its mates billions of pounds to manufacture/ source (faulty) PPE during the pandemic without undertaking basic due diligence.**

Perhaps the irony continues with the escaping of any attention from central government on Tower Hamlets previous Mayor John Biggs's Labour administration, despite the fact that it didn't sign off the council's accounts for seven years.

With the Best Value Inspection finished, the report published and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's decision to impose an 'Envoy' on Tower Hamlets for three years (with the bill for their expenses and costs funded by Tower Hamlets tax payers) this has once again created a torrent of comment on our borough. While Tower Hamlets council definitely has its problems and is far from perfect, it is a council that is bucking the trend and insourcing services, it is not bankrupt, nor is it in danger of going bust like so many other councils around the country are. It also has some of the healthiest reserves in local government. All this could lead to a bit of head scratching about why some of the more financially dysfunctional local authorities don't appear to be getting the same level of attention and criticism as compared to ours. Why is that? There are those that are using recent events to imply that that Tower Hamlets is a 'rotten borough'.

**Whatever its imperfections or areas for improvement we reject any such insinuations and any attempt to paint it as such denigrates the many outstanding achievements of UNISON members and others who have worked to build, insource and improve services in Tower Hamlets.**



Arch-Tory Michael Gove.

Picture: https://niallcooper.wordpress.com/

# Divest our staff pension fund for Palestine and the planet

>>>continued from front page

UNISON's campaign to get the council to divest its staff Pension Fund from companies complicit in human rights abuses of Palestinians and from planet destroying fossil fuels kicked off in earnest in September with a noisy lobby of the Pensions Committee and the launch of a petition aimed at getting enough signatures to trigger a debate at a full Council meeting. A UNISON delegation addressed the Pensions Committee and put forward the reasonable demand for the ethical investment of our pension pots.

## No to complicit investments

Across the UK LGPS funds invest billions in companies complicit in grave violations of Palestinian human rights and in the fossil fuel industry.

This includes companies supplying weapons/military technology used to carry out attacks on Palestinians, including the military assault on Gaza; companies providing infrastructure for Israel's unlawful military occupation; and companies conducting business activity in, or with, illegal settlements on stolen Palestinian land. Investments in fossil fuels are not only harmful to the environment but put the sustainable future of pensions at risk. It drives climate change and contradicts political commitments to tackle it.

## Ethical investment

One of the advantages of being able to join the LGPS is that at the end of our working lives we have access to a decent occupational pension. But no one wants to live off money made from companies that profit from death, mutilation, climate change, destruction and military occupation. UNISON, alongside other local civil society organisations, is calling on the council to transparently conduct an audit of its pension investments and to then start a managed processed of divesting from any complicit companies accompanied by an ethical investment strategy.

**It's time for our Pensions Committee to disclose and divest – we will not stop, we will not rest until they do they right thing.**



Workplace Day of Action for peace.

# What can you do?

**Join the campaign and get involved! Acting together, we can end our pension fund from investing in complicit companies.**

**1. Sign and circulate the petition** – 2,000 signatures are needed to trigger a debate at a full council meeting. Anyone who lives, works or studies in Tower Hamlets can sign. Follow the link or QR code to sign – ***https://shorturl.at/LzEWS*** When you sign, provide the address at which you live, work or study in the Borough.

**2. The TH Coalition for Ethical Investment is calling for volunteers** to help with petition signing stalls during weekends and at other times. To sign up: ***lbthdivestpetition@gmail.com***

**3. If you are paying into the LGPS** or are a retired member drawing a pension from the Fund, email the Pensions Committee to demand they divest. You can find their names and contact details at: ***https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=392*** UNISON is developing a range of letter templates for members to use, keep checking the Branch website for details. ***https://towerhamlets.unison.site/***

**4. If you live in the borough** email the Mayor at ***mayor@towerhamlets.gov.uk*** and your ward Councillors to demand that the council divests. You can find your Councillors contact details at ***https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/mgFindMember.aspx***

**5. Spread the word** – tell your colleagues about UNISON's campaign. Many people don't think about how their personal pension pot is invested – and most would be horrified to know the reality.

**6. Join events** – more events will be announced over 2025.




**Grab a copy of UNISON's easy to understand guide to Pension Divestment and how to support the campaign. Pensions can be confusing, so this short leaflet has been developed to help members understand the key issues. You can find a copy on the Branch website and hard copies are being sent to all work sites. To request more, contact the Branch office (see back page).**

## UNISON is calling on every member to sign the petition – don't delay, sign today!

# UNISON Equalities

**If you are interested in getting involved in activities to take forward UNISON's equality agenda, get in touch with the Branch office.**




UNISON bloc at Trans+ Pride.

# Year of the LGBT+ worker – in review

>>>continued from front page




by THOMAS FRENCH, LGBT+ Equality Officer

**What a year of the LGBT+ workers it has been!**

It started with sponsoring the council's Tower Pride Staff Network's screening of the film 'Pride' during LGBT History Month. An important reminder on how our community can show solidarity.

One of the highlights of the year came in July with members marching in London Trans+ Pride. We had the biggest turnout of any UNISON Branch, with UNISON overall being the largest group in the Trade Union bloc. The march broke the record for the biggest recorded Trans Pride demo. We were all very proud to make history and show a hostile UK political landscape that Trans+ voices need to be heard!

More recently we organised a Training and Away-day on how to be a Trans Ally. Over 20 branch activists and Tower Pride Staff Network Steering Committee members attended. We learnt important skills on how to challenge discrimination in the workplace and how to stand with trans+ colleagues and be true allies in these scary times for the trans+ community.

Branch Officers also met with Human Resources to review the council's policies with the goal of ensuring that they were anti-discriminatory and LGBT+ friendly. In November we sponsored the Trans in the workplace event and members attended the candlelit Trans Day of Remembrance event outside the Town Hall.

Over 2024 we recruited many LGBT+ staff members, turning new members into new branch activists to continue the important work for all LGBT+ workers. We rounded off the year with solidarity donations to Positive East and the Trans Women's Shelter.

**I would like to thank the Branch office, staff and activists for making it such a successful Year of LGBT+ workers.**



Placard making workshop for Trans+ pride.

## Unison LGBT+ Conference

# Inspiring moments, new connections, and the power of community

**UNISON's LGBT+ Conference 2024 took place in November in Edinburgh. To mark the special year a larger than usual delegation from Tower Hamlets attended. Our delegates rocked! – making powerful contributions on motions about organising against HIV stigma and about trans rights.**

**Young member and first-time delegate, MARSHALL SAVAGE, even received a standing ovation when speaking on a motion. Marshall shares his reflections:**

'The conference was not just a gathering of minds and passionate activists; it was a powerful reminder of why our fight for equality, visibility, and representation matters so deeply. Surrounded by friends, colleagues, and allies from across the UK we came together to discuss policies and motions that impact every corner of our community, knowing that the work we do today will shape our future….. The conference wasn't just about policies - it was about finding support, building connections, and sharing moments of joy and solidarity. Meeting people from UNISON Greater London Region left me feeling grateful for how genuinely supportive everyone was. When we stand together we amplify each other's voices and that was powerfully felt in every corner of the conference hall…. What truly took me by surprise was the profound sense of belonging I felt throughout the conference. Growing up I never had a community like this and I hadn't realised how much it would mean to me to find one. Being welcomed so warmly and knowing I was surrounded by people who understood me on such a deep level was emotional. It brought tears to my eyes to see just how many of us are out there ready to support one another. In those moments I knew I wasn't alone. The power of that realisation is something I'll carry with me forever.'




Marshall taking his first steps into UNISON activism.

# Schools Power



Learning and laughs at the school stewards training day.

## Developing our school stewards

**There was lots of learning and loads of laughs when School Stewards from across the borough came together in November for a special training, refresher and away day at the Town Hall.**

It can be difficult for school stewards to get released to undertake training, so it was an action-packed day with lots crammed in. Stewards learned how to: support and represent members in early stage sickness absence review meetings; advocate for disabled staff and press for reasonable adjustments, and received a briefing on the proposed School Support Staff Negotiating Body. Stewards were treated to a tasty Palestinian themed lunch.

**One steward's verdict:**
Jane O'Sullivan, Steward at George Greens School said: *'It's always great to have an opportunity to meet with other stewards from schools around the borough to share experiences and to hear that we face similar challenges as reps.*

*Training days like this give us the chance to find out about new legislation affecting our members and to brush up on our skills so we can best support UNISON members at our school. It was also nice to have a delicious lunch put on for us and to network with people from the Branch.*

*Thanks for organising it, Kerie, Justine and Emma.'*



UNISON members join with other trade union members outside Central Foundation Girls School for the Workplace Day of Action for Peace.

## School members – UNISON's pension divestment campaign affects you!

**School support staff, like council staff, are eligible to join Tower Hamlets Council's Local Government Pension Scheme. Many UNISON members working in Tower Hamlets schools are paying contributions into the scheme. But we need to ensure our pension fund is ethically invested and not used to fund climate change and human rights abuses. Make sure colleagues at your school know about UNISON's campaign to get our local pension fund ethically invested and sign the petition today (see page 3).**

## School members – get help this winter



**The Winter Essentials Grant from UNISON Welfare offers a £200 voucher for food shopping to eligible UNISON members on low incomes. Most of the branch's low income members work in schools and school kitchens. Applications open online for 24 hours on 11 December, 2024, and eligible members will be chosen at random. Full details at:** ***https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/winter-essentials-grant/***

## Get ready for the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB)

**UNISON is at the forefront of work on new legislation for school support staff. It's working with the government to create a new negotiating body which will decide pay, terms and conditions for school support staff, as well as taking a new approach to training and development.**

### What is the SSSNB?

The new Labour Government is committed to developing the SSSNB. At the moment, the majority of school support staff are covered by the same negotiating body as council workers (the National Joint Council or NJC). The SSSNB will be a negotiating body that only talks about school support staff. The new negotiating body will cover pay, terms and conditions, and access to training for school support staff.

### Will my school be included?

The SSSNB will include all types of state-funded schools, including academies and schools within multi academy trusts. This means that all school support staff will benefit from the same pay and conditions; academies will no longer be able to opt-out of paying nationally negotiated rates of pay.

### How is UNISON involved?

UNISON is working with the Department for Education to set up the legislation needed to form the SSSNB. It is involved in discussions about who should be included and what should be covered. It will likely be at least two years before the SSSNB is operational because of the work required to set it up and to get the legislation passed. When the negotiating body is formed, UNISON will sit on the trade union side and so will bring the views of UNISON members to the table. It was agreed at this year's Local Government Conference that any final proposal following discussions and negotiations should be put to our school members for approval by vote before UNISON signs off on them.
**Watch this space.**

# Leisure / Be Well news roundup

**The welcome insourcing of all Leisure Centres from GLL back into the council in May has been a massive undertaking and understandably in the first year things have been rather bumpy. UNISON reps have been hard at work supporting members and trying to sort out some of the bumps.**



Stewards visit Whitechapel Leisure Centre.

## Improving staff-only areas

**Would you want to eat your lunch in a staff room which has holes in the wall, a kitchenette falling apart and with carpet so filthy it is beyond even an industrial steam clean? No!**

Unfortunately, this is what some Leisure staff have to put up with. Stewards have toured all Leisure Centres and were taken aback at the seriously grotty state of the some of the staff rooms.

UNISON has been pressing management to make improvements. We have been told that a funding bid to upgrade these areas is now in. It is unacceptable for staff to have to take their breaks and eat their lunches in such grotty, unclean and rundown spaces and UNISON will be watching the outcome of the bid closely.

## A good news story!

**A massive congrats to Angela, Duty Manager at Tiller Leisure Centre, who with UNISON's assistance won a Grievance Appeal and will now receive a hefty lump of back pay for over two years' worth of weekend enhancements that she was not paid.**

UNISON had helped Angela to submit a Grievance prior to her transfer from GLL into the council. Under TUPE legislation the Grievance transferred with her, but the council then dragged its feet for months in setting up the appeal meeting. UNISON was relentless in pursuing a fair hearing for Angela, and when it finally took place, it was smiles all round with Angela winning her case.

She said: *Thank you so much to Kerie Anne and the UNISON team for all the support and guidance... without you I would not have got such a positive outcome. I would encourage everyone in Be Well to join UNISON.*



Angela – rather happy

## No to a two-tier Workforce

**From the outset UNISON has lobbied the council to fully harmonise all Leisure staff onto the council's terms and conditions instead of leaving them on the inferior GLL contract.**

So, the union was horrified to be informed by senior management that new and externally recruited applicants into a number of Duty Manager (DM) vacancies were to be put on the council contract but those who had transferred from GLL would not be. This would result in two groups of staff doing exactly the same job working alongside each other – with one group on much better conditions and pay.

UNISON swung into action registering its strong disagreement and reminding management that if they pushed ahead this had the potential to trigger a trade dispute. The union's concern was in no way a criticism of the newly recruited staff, but rather was about management's lack of attention in ensuring fairness and the demoralising impact it would have on the wider DM workforce.

In the end and to their credit, management took on board UNISON's concerns, backed down from the original plan and agreed to harmonise ***all*** DMs. Attention now needs to turn to harmonising the rest of the Leisure workforce.

## CHRISTMAS COMPETITION

## Win a selection of UNISON goodies

**Get excited at the chance to win this bundle of goodies from Santa UNISON. To enter email the Branch Administrators (contact details on back page) with the subject header 'Christmas competition' and answer the following question: What are the names of the three unions that merged in 1993 to form UNISON? Correct entries will go into a prize draw and the winner will be announced at the end of January 2025.**



# Crash and burn Tories

**One of the major highlights of 2024 was the long-awaited for rout of the Tories at the general election in July.**

After 14 years of battering public sector workers and services with an endless dose of austerity combined with the acute mismanagement of the Covid 19 pandemic, there was a thumping round of applause from Trade Unionists when the curtain finally set on what was a miserable chapter for working people. Now it's time for Labour to step up to the plate and deliver for working people. While there no doubt will be serious disagreements with Labour going forward (and we have already seen this in relation to matters such as the cancelling of winter fuel payments for the elderly) no one will shed a tear for the Tories.

**UNISON now needs to use its Labour Link structures to hold Labour's feet to the fire to ensure they deliver on the issues important for working people.**

# Labour's plan to transform workers' rights

**Branch Labour Link Officer JED SCOLES shares his views on flag ship employment legislation Labour has recently brought forward – which would have been unthinkable under a Tory Government.**

**Labour's new *Employment Rights Bill* is set to give working people the biggest boost in protections we've seen in decades. It's all about making work fairer, more secure, and giving everyone the dignity they deserve.**



Jed Scoles – Branch Labour Link Officer

The bill tackles dodgy practices like zero-hours contracts and unfair sackings, known as 'fire and rehire.' It will make sure workers get fair notice of shifts, guaranteed hours, and even compensation if shifts are cancelled at the last minute. Workers will also be protected from being unfairly dismissed from the first day on the job.

For families, there's a lot to cheer about. Parental leave will be more flexible, and workers will have the right to take time off to grieve a loved one. Pregnant women and new mums will get stronger protections, and employers will have to explain why they've refused flexible working requests.

The bill also takes a stand for fairness at work. It strengthens rules against sexual harassment, tackles the gender pay gap, and makes sure everyone gets fair pay and proper sick pay.

Trade unions will be given more power to stand up for workers too, with stronger protections and simpler ways to organise.

**This bill is about making work better for everyone – fair pay, better rights, and real respect.**

# No to racism, fascism and bigotry

**A disturbing feature of 2024 was a resurgence in activity by the racist far right. But the massive anti-racist response to this fascist wave has been heartening.**

The social media influencer, Tommy Robinson, has managed to mobilise large crowds of racists on the streets of London for two major demonstrations. Many UNISON members have been shocked at the way mobs of racists have sought to use tragic events in Southport to divide and spread hate – based on mistruths and false information.

Far right thugs have also taken to the streets of Southport, Hartlepool, London and more to attack emergency service workers, to target Muslim communities with xenophobic hatred and to terrorise refugees – no doubt whipped up by the racist rhetoric of politicians like Nigel Farage and Suella Braverman.




UNISON members join the mobilisation to protect refugee support services from a threatened far right demo in Waltham Forest.

In response thousands of anti-racists, including from Tower Hamlets UNISON, joined counter mobilisations organised by Stand up to Racism, outnumbering the racists whenever they showed up. The Branch has also made a donation to Stand up to Racism's Unity Fund and supported local unity rallies.

**Our message is clear: stop the far right, unity over division. We are the many, they are the few. Together we can stop the far right.**




Smash the far right! – UNISON members make a new friend (RMT leader Mick Lynch, centre ) at the recent massive Stand Up To Racism counter mobilisation in central London.

Grab one of these fab calendars, with images of Palestine from local artist Tim Saunders who was sponsored by TH UNISON.



# CORRIDORS OF POWER



**Offensive objects? UNISON lollipops.**

## Sugar Rush

**Q. Do you find lollipops offensive?**
**A. No.**
It appears some senior managers in the council do though… Branch Officers were intrigued to be summoned to a meeting to discuss 'complaints and concerns' about the conduct of UNISON stewards at the recent staff conference held at the Copper Box Arena. Their alleged naughty misbehaviour? Smiling and handing out free UNISON lollipops in the shape of hearts to staff queuing to get in. Advance Trigger warning – stewards will be handing out bags of Haribo at the next one.

## No Fun(ds)

Black Friday is famous for frenzied crowds desperately scrambling to pick up a bargain for Christmas, as documented in YouTube's 'Craziest Black Friday Moments'. Perhaps another clip now needs to be added to the channel – of skint council and school workers in Tower Hamlets surging at money machines only to discover that their all-important




November pay packet was missing, prompting a tsunami of exasperated hand ringing and wailing across the borough. Staff were perplexed to receive a remarkable email later that day, pinning the blame for the payment delay on 'extra bank clearances due to Black Friday'. Cue eyeroll.

**STOP PRESS!**

# Council signs up to UNISON's Migrant Care Worker Charter!




As we go to press news had just come in that the council had voted on a cross-party basis to sign up and implement the Charter, with Councillor Amy Lee moving the motion at a full council meeting. This makes it the first local authority in London to do so.

As a result of the introduction of the Health and Care Worker Visa there has been a surge in cases of Modern-Day Slavery. Migrant care workers are too often the victims of exploitation including poor accommodation and bad employment practices like the illegal deduction of wages, high agency fees, not paying the minimum wage, trade union victimisation and inadequate health and safety.

UNISON has been at the forefront of throwing a spotlight of such practices and in developing initiatives to address it. Charter signatories will ensure that migrant care workers should be treated fairly and equitably in relation to other employees and will ensure commissioned providers and agencies also will. This is important as domiciliary and residential care in the borough is now largely outsourced.

The Branch intends to hold an event in the early new year to mark this historic milestone and congratulates councillors for working together to agree this important policy. It will approach senior managers to discuss how it can be implemented on the ground and compliance monitored.

## ▷ Contact us and request a new joiners form

UNISON

**Town Hall, 2nd floor, 160 Whitechapel Road, E1 1BJ**

- Email **jamie.donohue-strawbridge@towerhamlets.gov.uk** or ring **020 7364 5302**
- Email **bernadette.hall@towerhamlets.gov.uk** or ring **020 7364 6516**
- **Facebook:** Tower Hamlets Unison
- **X:** @UNISON_TH
- **Instagram:** thunison
- **Branch website:** https://towerhamlets.unison.site/

# Branch Annual General Meeting & Elections 2025

## Date for the diary

As in previous years this will be a rolling AGM meeting (AGM) with local meetings to facilitate attendance. Full details will be published.

### ● Main (Hybrid) AGM meeting
### Tuesday 25th February 2024, 12.30pm

Council Chamber, Town Hall. Lunch provided from 12.15pm
One hour facility time for council staff has been agreed to facilitate attendance.

### ● Schools (Hybrid) AGM
### Thursday 27th February, 5pm

Room C1, Town Hall. Refreshments available from 4.30pm

Any motions for debate or nominations must be received by **17th January**. You can complete an online nomination form here:
***https://towerhamlets.unison.site/th-unison-agm-2025-advance-notification-and-nomination-form/***

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