Tower Power

The News Sheet of Tower Hamlets UNISON

December 2025 No 338

Season's greetings to all our members



Unity victory parade after UKIP are banned from entering the borough – Saturday 25th October.

United to fight the Far Right

Tower Hamlets has long been a target of the racist and fascist Far Right because of its rich diversity and history of welcoming refugees. In 2025 the borough again found itself the focus of unwelcome attention from a reinvigorated far right movement.

While the current spate of racist activity is led by a different St George-flag-waving-rabble of faces and organisations, they're peddling the same hate we've seen many times, attempting to pit white workers against workers from migrant backgrounds. This time repackaged into a narrative falsely claiming that migrants are a 'danger to women and children'.

And like in days gone by when our borough has come under attack, the community again united and organised to block and challenge the racists and defend our bit of the East End. UNISON has been at the heart of these efforts.



On the emergency town hall demo – see page 2

More on the fight against the Far Right – INSIDE

United to fight the Far Right

Community stands together

by Jon Lilly, UNISON Convenor

The front of the Town Hall was awash with anti-fascists on Saturday 25th October (see front cover, main picture) in what was one of the largest anti-racist mobilisations in Tower Hamlets for some years.

UKIP leader Nick Tenconi announced that they would be marching a 'deportation tour' through Whitechapel market. They claimed that the area was in 'danger and under attack' from 'migrants and islamists'.

But the community said loudly and proudly that the danger was from UKIP and their ilk – bad faith actors who were commuting across the country to spread hate and division.

In response to Nationalist Tenconi and his followers, a coalition of local activists organised a counter protest to demonstrate unity and celebrate solidarity in Tower Hamlets. This coalition was spearheaded by United East End, the same coalition formed to stand up against Tommy Robinson and the EDL when they marched through Tower Hamlets in 2011.

Tower Hamlets continues to demonstrate a zero-tolerance policy for fascism and racism, and when the police were informed of the thousands of anticipated counter-protestors, Tenconi and UKIP were banned from entering the borough. Though this was a victory, the counter protest went ahead anyway, rebranded as a unity celebration.

For a few hours, Whitechapel Road was filled with thousands of people; chanting, clapping, and listening to music. Speeches filled the air creating a warm, festival-like environment. Unions, faith groups, community groups, LGBTQ+ activists, anti-racist activists, politicians, and local people stood together to chant *'This is what community looks like',* pausing only for Zuhr prayers. UNISON is proud to have been a part of organising and bringing people together for this event.

Here's to many more!

Emergency Town Hall demo

by Justine Canady, Branch Comms Officer

Two weeks earlier, on 8th October, Tower Hamlets UNISON led a unity protest with the local community against racism and anti-migrant rhetoric outside the Town Hall – in response to a demonstration called by a far-right group, the 'Pink Ladies'.

The 'Pink Ladies' are a group based in the Isle of Dogs who say immigration is unsafe for women and children and have been leading anti-refugee protests outside the Britannia Hotel where asylum seekers are being housed; their call out was re-tweeted by Tommy Robinson. They had turned up to oppose a motion being debated at full council that evening condemning far-right activity targeting asylum seekers.



Unity outside the Town Hall.

But hundreds of anti-racist community protesters joined TH UNISON's call-out to stand in front of the Town Hall for a counter protest, outnumbering the 'Pink Ladies' five to one.

We organised this demo because our colleagues deserve safety and it's the duty of a trade union to counter racism at work and in wider society. We want to counter the lies told about refugees and migrants by the likes of the 'Pink Ladies' and Tommy Robinson.

They say that migrants make women and children unsafe, but we know this is not true, rather it is the years of austerity and cuts to public services that make women and children unsafe.

The say that refugees take housing away from "native" Britons, but we know that refugees have not caused a housing crisis; rather, the Thatcher-era policy of Right to Buy, the lack of rent controls, and underfunding of local councils have led to the existing housing crisis.

UNISON will continue to organise against the rise of the far right by advocating for migrants' rights and an improvement to living conditions for all residents. To get involved, contact the branch office.

Proud of our branch history

In 1993 something shocking happened. The racist British National Party (BNP) candidate for the marginal Isle of Dogs Millwall seat, Derek Beacon, won a council by-election by seven votes.

What did UNISON members do in response? They walked out of work on a wildcat strike in protest, and to make it clear that they would not tolerate having a Nazi as one of their employers.

Then they did what we do best in Tower Hamlets – they organised alongside the local community. This saw 40,000 people marching through the streets of Tower Hamlets in 1994 on the TUC's 'Unite Against Racism' demo to send a message to the BNP to get out of our borough.

That year saw UNISON members play their part in the major national campaign 'Council Workers against the Nazis' which included sending six coachloads to Welling in south-east London to shut down the BNP headquarters.

UNISON members organised mass leafleting seasons after work to counter leaflet whenever the BNP were spotted in the borough, which they often were especially in Brick Lane. A huge 'Don't vote Nazi' campaign organised on the Isle of Dogs ensured the defeat of Beacon and the BNP in the 1994 council elections.

Rupert Franklin (second from right in the picture, right), then a young officer in the Benefits Team, who has since returned to work for the council, reflects back on that time. *'As a teen and in my early 20s, I saw the rise of the far right… this was just one of the many rallies I went to and was one of the few occasions when we were not run off the estates by fascist thugs as the BNP tried to take hold by sowing division and hate. Being part of a collective and standing up for what is right led me to become a social worker'.*



UNISON members at the TUC anti-racist demo in Tower Hamlets in 1994. Rupert is second from the right.

Upgrade victories


Double (good) trouble: Kridos with Aminal and (below) Shenneth.

Higher and fairer

(Super) Steward Kridos Pavlous has been at it again – getting UNISON members upgraded that is. Thanks to Kridos' support and guidance, Parking Team Leaders and Sports Development officers are now enjoying higher and fairer pay for the jobs they do.

Parking Team Leaders

The Parking Team Leaders, unhappy with the distinction of being some of the lowest paid first line supervisors in the borough, contacted Kridos, who is the steward based at the Toby Club.

Their outdated job description no longer reflected the complexity of their duties. Management positively recognised this and accepted a revised job description written by UNISON in conjunction with the Team leaders and submitted under the Individual Right of Review provisions. Their job was then re-evaluated to be a whopping two grades higher.

Thanks to Krido's negotiation, management also agreed to let them start on the second increment up as an acknowledgment of the time it had taken to resolve the matter. Very happy with the outcome, Aminal Hoque, Parking Team Leader said: *"Unison's knowledge put us in a position where we were able to secure an upgrade that reflected how complex our job had become".*

Sports Development Officers

After a long battle, two Sports Development Officers won a well-earned upgrade with UNISON's help.

Dissatisfied with their grade evaluation, Pauline Stewart and Shenneth Brereton got Kridos on the job, whose beady eye identified that some of the factors in their job evaluation had been underscored. He helped them to submit an appeal which they went on to win.

Given the time it took to resolve the matter, he also negotiated a tidy back payment to be dropped into their pay packet. Thrilled at the higher grade and arrears payment, Pauline Stewart said *"Unison had the knowledge to provide a solid case and win our appeal".*

NB: the strength of any IRR or evaluation appeal will depend on the facts of the individual case.



THE RESTRUCTURE ROLLER COASTER



As we head into the council's budget season, anxious staff are sitting on the edge of their seats awaiting news about what it might bring for their service and job. Especially as the council's restructure 'roller coaster' is already looping down the track.

Procurement Team

Staff in the Corporate Procurement Team were aghast to be presented with a proposal to down grade half their team – despite it being a highly skilled niche area with a long history of recruitment problems.

Shockingly, the council had tasked the whole project and the staff consultation to a consultant engaged by a private company, Lumensol Ltd – who made such a hot mess of the consultation launch meeting it left staff and UNISON reps bewildered. UNISON immediately wrote to the Corporate Director, Abdulrazak Kassim, to complain and to demand that responsibility for the change process be removed from the hands of a consultant.

At the end of the consultation UNISON registered a 'Failure to Agree' triggering the council's dispute resolution procedure, which is waiting to be taken forward. It is unacceptable for the council to attempt to introduce job descriptions that downgrade half a skilled team on the 'say so' of a consultant. It is also unacceptable to hand over responsibility for running a consultation about proposals that will have a major impact on the livelihoods of staff to an external consultant. **UNISON's view? – very badly done.**

Empowering Services

The Orwellian named 'Empowering Services' reorganisation has left some staff feeling, well…a bit disempowered.

The 'mega' reorganisation initially had over a 100 staff in scope from all directorates. But following a 'Pre-Failure to Agree' joint trade union letter sent to senior management setting out a range of concerns, approximately 50 per cent of the proposals were shelved. The concerns included an increase in the number of senior jobs created at the expense of more modestly graded ones, resulting in equality concerns and the risk of compulsory redundancy for some staff lower down the structure.

While UNISON acknowledges that in any very large reorganisation there may be a variety of staff views based on individual circumstances, a bottom line must be that the risk of compulsory redundancy needs to be removed/minimised for the now much smaller group of staff that remain in scope and who are in competitive pools and that jobs must be doable.

UNISON has made this position clear and at the time of writing is seeking talks with management with the goal of ensuring there are no compulsory redundancies.

Leisure/Be Well – celebrating the end of a two-tier workforce

Leisure Centre staff are imminently to be harmonised onto the council contract and those who are inappropriately on zero hours contracts will be moved onto permanent ones.

This represents a major victory for UNISON and for workplace fairness. UNISON had campaigned to improve contracts since staff working for GLL TUPE transferred into the council (still on their inferior GLL contracts) in mid-2024 when the Leisure Centres were insourced after 25 years. Back then the council had no plans to harmonise staff onto the better council contract.

But thanks to smart negotiating by UNISON, it managed to get two occupational groups in Leisure harmonised and off zero hours contracts at the end of 2024, as well as obtain a commitment from the council to harmonise all Leisure staff in the next financial year.

It has taken a huge amount of work by lots of people, but all staff who have consented to the change will be on new contracts by December. UNISON acknowledges the Administration and Management's role in listening to the union's arguments to end the two-tier workforce and then for undertaking the work to make it a reality.

While there are undoubtedly many problems dogging the Leisure Centres that need attention, ensuring staff are on fair contracts represents the 'foundation block' on which further progressive changes may be built.

Schools Power

Christmas competition for school members

Santa UNISON is back in town with a sack full of UNISON goodies that this year is aimed at members working in schools. Enter the prize draw to win this selection of school support staff goodies by answering the following question.



Q. The photograph (below) is of a picket line at a local school on the Isle of Dogs where, in April-June 2025, UNISON members took strike action over workload and school safety concerns. **What is the name of the school?**



Email your answer to the Branch office, emails on back page. The winner will be announced at the Branch's Schools (Hybrid) AGM on 12th February 2026, 5pm.

Win for cleaners!

Outsourced cleaners at St Paul's Way Trust School who work for Atlas FM are all smiles thanks to the swift intervention of their local steward Dionne Mottley and Assistant Branch Secretary Justine Kohl.

Stewards were alarmed to be told by the low-paid cleaners that they had not yet received the back-dated NJC award – which had been settled late summer and should have been paid by now.

UNISON reps got straight onto Atlas, who have now confirmed in writing that the salary uplift and arrears would be paid at the end of November, in time for Christmas.

Esther Nermorin, one of the cleaners, said of Justine: "A big thank you to our one-in-a-million UNISON rep. We all really appreciate all you have done for us. We have all received our NJC backpay now".

A win for BSOs

Being awarded the prized Ofsted 'Outstanding' rating for its Children's and Families Service (CF) in 2025 was a gi-normous fluffy feather in the council's cap.

As a way of saying 'thank you' to CF staff for their hard work, they were granted an additional day of annual leave. And fair enough too – but, hang on – not all CF staff were given the extra day of paid leisure.

Business Support Officers (BSOs), who are an essential part of all CF teams, were left out in the cold. Thanks to UNISON this has now been put right.

BSO Marie tells the story:

"Children's Services staff were awarded an additional day of annual leave as a thank you following the Outstanding Ofsted. BSOs within CF teams were not granted this though which seemed unfair.

We brought this to UNISON's attention, who then advocated on our behalf, to ensure that BSOs were also awarded this day of leave and recognised for our contribution to the achievement. We were very grateful for this result."

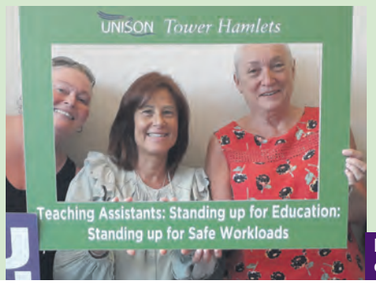


UNISON staff and members at the CF staff conference.

Could you be a UNISON school steward? Yes!

Being a steward is very rewarding and comes with paid time off for trade union duties and access to training from UNISON. It also is a chance to learn a whole new package of skills.

With cuts to school funding and pupil rolls many school members are now facing reorganisations, and local stewards play a key role in supporting staff fight for fair treatment in difficult times.



Debbie (middle) with other school stewards.

Debbie Whelan, UNISON steward at Lansbury Lawrence Primary school said:

"I've been a UNISON School steward for 15 years and it's really satisfying, helping members with things like sickness, grievances and disciplinary meetings.

"I've learnt loads of new skills and if I need back up or help, the branch office is always there to support me. I would encourage other school support staff to give it a go!"

For more info on how to become a UNISON school steward, contact the branch office (see back page).

Social Work



Davide with other UNISON social work delegates.

Social workers get organised

UNISON's National Social Work Seminar held on Saturday 18th October at Birmingham Aston University saw nearly 100 social work members gather for an action-packed day of learning and discussion about how social workers can organise in and across branches. ASC Social Worker DAVIDE ARTUSO attended as a Tower Hamlets delegate.

"Attending the Seminar was a genuinely inspiring experience. I joined colleagues from across the UK for thought-provoking workshops: one on Social Worker wellbeing, and another on the impact of artificial intelligence in social work. The wellbeing session highlighted practical strategies for managing stress and secondary trauma, reminding us of the importance of self-care and robust organisational support.

The AI workshop sparked lively debate about the opportunities and risks of new technologies, including the need for strong union involvement to safeguard our professional values and workforce interests. It was great to connect with fellow social workers, share experiences, discuss how we organise, and see firsthand how UNISON supports social workers.

I was also impressed by UNISON's principled stance on the situation in Palestine, reflecting the union's commitment to social justice and solidarity.

I left feeling energised and motivated to continue working collectively for social justice as part of our union."

STANDING UP FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

The government's turbo-charged anti-migrant worker rhetoric and proposals are leaving many UNISON members from migrant backgrounds anxious about the future.

Are you a migrant worker?

If you are a migrant worker have you thought about joining UNISON's migrant worker network? It is an informal network of UNISON members with a first generation immigrant background including overseas and migrant workers, EU settled status workers and workers who have subsequently naturalised as British citizens or who have indefinite leave to remain. You can sign up at: **https://www.unison.org.uk/unison-migrant-worker-network/**

Goals of the network include:

- **Support members to uphold existing rights;**
- **Encourage union participation and activism;**
- **Share organising key lessons and best practice;**
- **Build solidarity across the union; and**
- **Campaign for fairer visa rules**

Immigration advice for UNISON members

If you need advice on immigration issues related to your work situation and right to work in the UK, then UNISON can help. The union provides free immigration telephone advice through a partnership with the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) to provide this support.

If you have been a member of UNISON for more than four weeks and need immigration advice and information, please call UNISON Direct at 0800 0857857.



TH UNISON Branch Committee members join with other activists to demand an end to the exploitation of migrant workers.

Get ready for UNISON's Year of Green Activity 2026

No jobs on a dead planet!

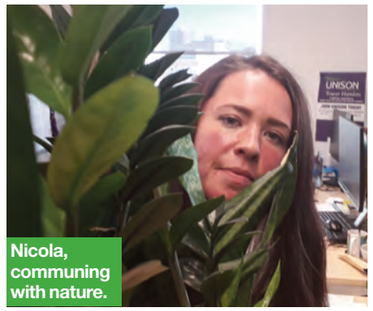
by Nicola Klinger, Branch Environmental Officer

The climate emergency is happening now. It impacts us, our families, our workplaces and the services we provide.

Super-hot summers (and no clear legal temperature protections for those working in the heat) and our LG pension fund STILL invested in fossil fuel companies. We need to campaign for greener politics, more sustainable workplaces and climate action that is not just urgent but also fair.

This is why it is so important for Tower Hamlets UNISON to create a strong momentum for UNISON's Year of Green Activity 2026. After two years as the Environmental Rep on the Branch Committee, I'm handing over the baton and a new 'Green Officer' will be needed from February 2026.

The role is what you make it – from creating a Green Network, bargaining on workplace issues and being part of London and national networks. My proudest moments have definitely been handing out plants in collaboration with the Women's Network, holding a stall as part of Tower Hamlets Climate Alliance and of course our Pension Divestment Campaign.



Nicola, communing with nature.

Could you be our new leader of Green Activism in 2026? We need a passionate member to stand for Environmental Officer, to be ready to take on urgent climate activism and connect with other members to share ideas and push for greener, fairer workplaces and communities.

If you're interested, contact the branch office. For more info on the Year of Green Activity go to: *https://www.unison.org.uk/2026-unison-year-of-green-activity/*

Trans rights



Call to action

UNISON was pleased to support the Trans Day of Remembrance vigil organised by the Tower Pride Forum held on 1st November.

UNISON LGBT+ activists played a key role in organising the moving event held on the Town Hall steps, which included powerful speeches and a minute silence to honour the memory of Trans people whose lives have been lost to violence and discrimination.

While representing a moment of reflection; it's also a call to action for equality, dignity, and safety in every space, including the workplace.

Retired members' news

Retired from work – but not the fight!

by John McLoughlin – Retired Members Secretary

Social

UNISON Retired members group enjoyed a stimulating and topical walk in September, guided by renowned local historian David Rosenberg, "Anti-Fascist Footprints."

As befitted a tour through the victory over Mosley's fascists in 1936, we ended at the Cable Street mural, followed by a meal together. We meet regularly throughout the year, physically and online. The group is open to all retired members, and we are always looking for suggestions for events, so if you have any please let us know!

Campaigning

Retired members have also supported branch activities like lobbying for divestment of our pension fund from companies complicit in genocide in Palestine and for ethical investment and keeping UKIP out of Whitechapel.


Retired members' social walk.

We also participate in the regional and national retired members, sending delegates to the National UNISON Retired Members Conference, where we have successfully raised issues of concern to retired members like the attack on our Winter Fuel Allowance, support for BDS, and Trans Rights for older people.

Get involved

The group is open to all retired members. It's a great way of staying connected with other older branch members and branch activity and meeting some new people as well! It provides scope for volunteering to help with branch activities. It also gives us the opportunity to raise matters of particular concern for older people more widely in our union. **If you want to get involved just contact John McLoughlin through the Branch Office.**

CORRIDORS OF POWER

Nice little earner…

Being a member of the gang of government-appointed 'fixers' sent in to run bankrupt Birmingham City Council has proved to be a lucrative second career for former Tower Hamlets 'Fire & Rehire' Mayor John Biggs, who was himself fired by local voters back in 2022. Despite the city council making mega cuts to public services and angering bin workers so much over pay that they have been on strike since March, the 'fixers' have reportedly racked up nearly £2 million in fees and expenses for themselves. Biggs alone has estimated to have pocketed a cool £175, 009.



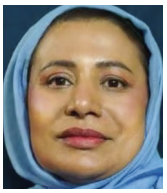
John Biggs – a pocket full of 'Pie and Mash'?

I'm (not) a celebrity, get me out of here!

It's always good to catch up on the current whereabouts of departed Tower Hamlets Senior Managers. And who could forget the one-time Head of Human Resources, Pat Chen, who set forth to new pastures in 2024. Pat (remembered for her persistent and, thanks to UNISON ultimately thwarted HR mission to slash long established pay protection arrangements for staff from two years down to one) has now re-surfaced in an interim senior HR role at Brent council. Corridors assumes Pat must being feeling relaxed and right at home there. Brent only allows one year pay protection.

Remote working

Combining office with remote working is popular with many, in fact loads of staff would like more than what they're allowed. But it seems that some Tower Hamlets Councillors are taking the practice to the extreme. So much so it's irking the Department for Communities and angering residents. Cue former Labour and now Aspire Councillor for Mile End Sabina Khan (or has she resigned?) It appears Cllr Khan, despite holding multiple council committee roles, has missed more than half of her meetings this year because she was abroad – reportedly campaigning for a new job as a parliamentary candidate in Bangladesh. In response to complaints about her prolonged absence, sources report that the Councillor claims: 'I have continued to serve my constituents remotely….'



Sabina Khan – Remote working devotee.



Collect your 'Council Workers for Palestine' badge from the branch office, or message us to request one is sent to you. With Gaza now transformed into a mass grave/bombed out pile of rubble and reports of settler attacks on Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank surging, UNISON's campaign to get our staff pension fund divested from companies that profit from occupation, death and destruction will continue on in 2026. Watch this space.

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 2026

Date for the diary

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

Main AGM meeting (Hybrid)
Tuesday 10th February 2026, 12.30pm

Council Chamber, Town Hall. Lunch provided from 12.15pm,
One hour facility time on top of the lunch hour has been agreed by the CEO to facilitate attendance for council staff.

Schools AGM (Hybrid) [& those with differing work patterns]
Wednesday 11th February 2026, 5pm

Tower Hamlets Town Hall, report to reception.
Refreshments and a light snack from 4.30pm.

Any motions for debate or nominations must be received by **9th January**. You can complete an online nomination form at: ***https://towerhamlets.unison.site/th-unison-agm-2026-advance-notification-and-nomination-form/*** Or contact the branch office to request one is sent/emailed to you.

TowerPower is published by Tower Hamlets UNISON, Town Hall, 2nd floor, 160 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1BJ
Printed by Solopress Ltd.