

ACTIVE!



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SOLIDARITY FOR EVER!

In my first column as general secretary, I want to say a huge thank you to Yorkshire & Humberside members who put their trust in me to lead our great union. I also want to thank all members who took the time to vote in the election.

But what a time to be elected general secretary! The pandemic, its aftermath and the impact on our members is an enormous challenge. I know how our members are in the eye of the storm, putting themselves at risk, by putting the health and safety of the public and the most vulnerable first.

I promise, when we come out the other end, I will continue our fight against the government's ill-judged pay freeze for

public service workers. I'll push for the promised pay rise for NHS staff to be paid promptly and for the funding and political will to create that much-needed national care service.

I know that devolution is as important to the English regions as it is to the four nations, so I'll make sure Yorkshire & Humberside has the resources to deal with those issues that matter most to branches and members.

It is a critical time, but our union is in great shape – growing and vibrant – thanks to Dave Prentis and you. And together with our army of committed staff and dedicated activists, I know we will meet those challenges head on. Solidarity will win for us every time.



**CHRISTINA
MCANEA
GENERAL
SECRETARY**

Christina McAnea

THE TRUTH REVEALED

I am delighted to welcome our new general secretary to the Yorkshire and Humberside region and congratulate her on her election success.

As she says in her first comment piece for Active! the battle for a decent pay rise for our members is UNISON's top priority in the coming weeks.

The Covid pandemic has laid bare the desperate crisis created by the government's endless attacks on our public services.

We have huge shortages of medical care staff in the NHS, massive cuts to local government services and we have the tragic sight of foodbanks opening everywhere to feed desperate families. This should not be happening in Britain in the

21st century.

All this destruction and misery continues because of this government's insistence on awarding contracts to their mates.'

Our members have kept society going throughout the worst pandemic in 100 years. Our members in the NHS, local government and the care sector have once again demonstrated that they are our country's most important and valuable workers.

This current health crisis has glaringly revealed the truth: the government must invest in the public sector and in particular in the wages of the heroic people who provide our essential services. UNISON will make sure they hear that message, loud and clear.



**WENDY
NICHOLS
REGIONAL
CONVENOR**

W. Nichols

UNISON JUST KEEPS GROWING



UNISON membership continues to grow amid deep concern about the impact of the Covid pandemic on the working lives of public service workers.

Last year UNISON membership rose by over 38,000 (an increase of three per cent) and the Yorkshire and Humberside region by 1400 members (also three per cent).

Regional convener Wendy Nichols said: "Workers on whom the public rely most during these difficult times have realised that UNISON provides them with the guidance and representation they need."

Wendy pointed out that already in 2021 Yorkshire and Humberside UNISON membership has increased by a further 700.

The 7,500-strong North Yorkshire branch for instance

has seen an unprecedented 1,000 new members join in 2020.

Says Wendy: "In small private care homes, where there might have been one or two members, there are now four, five or six – and it's not passive membership, they're getting organised."

"The region continues to support the hard-pressed workforce and has telephoned over 30,000 members in the past nine months just to see if they need any support. This work continues on a daily basis.

"UNISON in the region continues to take up every issue raised by members in order to make their life more bearable during this pandemic. We applaud every one of our members for their dedication to duty and the excellent service they are delivering to the public."

TONY FIGHTS UNFAIR DISMISSAL

UNISON hero Tony Smith is taking his case for unfair dismissal to an employment tribunal after being dismissed by waste recycling company FCC. ('A credit to UNISON' Active! Winter 2020)

Ironically health and safety rep Tony, who led a campaign to win sick pay for his 2,500 colleagues, had been suspended for an alleged breach of health and safety rules. UNISON lawyers are optimistic that he will win his tribunal case.

Tony used his time away from work to set up the Unity food bank in Hull and has now secured a job with the city council as a children's care officer.

Regional organiser Joe Gibbins said: "During his time at the Unity shop he realised he wants to work in a role that helps people and I personally think he will make a fantastic role model for kids in care and will go

from strength to strength in the trade union movement. I am proud to call him a comrade and friend."



LET'S MAKE OUR VOICES HEARD



Regional convenor Wendy Nichols (right) is urging UNISON members to vote in a key election to choose the union's national body.

Wendy wants to encourage as many members as possible to participate in the poll to elect the national executive council which starts on May 4 and runs until May 27. The results will be announced on June 11.

Wendy said: "UNISON is the most democratic union in the country. It is led by us, the members and the activists, so let's use our right to influence the direction of our organisation. Let's make our voices heard."

All full members on the union's membership register on February 4 will be entitled to vote in the biennial election and those who have held full membership of UNISON since September 16, 2020 can put their names forward as candidates. All such applications together with nominations from branches and other nominating bodies, must be received by March 5.

The NEC is made up of representatives elected from all UNISON's regions and service groups, as well as seats for four black members, two young members and two disabled members. It has the power to act on behalf of the union and is responsible for implementing UNISON policy and delivering the union's objectives and priorities.

Ballot papers will be sent to members' homes or other notified address. They will be provided with a pre-paid envelope for the return of the ballot paper to the independent scrutineer.

Where members have previously requested materials in a special format (for example in large print), they will automatically receive the ballot pack

in that format. Any additional requests should be made to the ballot helpline on 0800 0857 857.

If individual members have not received a paper by May 13, they should contact the ballot helpline which is open from May 13 to May 20. Members with hearing difficulties can use textphone 0800 0967 968. It would help if callers have their membership number to hand.

The latest that members can request a ballot paper is May 20 in order to ensure members have the opportunity to vote in time.

Please note that the ballot helpline can only deal with queries from individual members. If branches believe there is a wide-scale problem with receipt of ballot papers among their members (for instance if whole departments or geographical areas have not received ballot papers) then the branch should contact the Member Liaison Unit via

NEC21election@unison.co.uk

The returning officer and scrutineer for this election is Civica Election Services. Email:

unison@cesvotes.com

Any complaint about the conduct of this election must be received no later than 5pm on June 1.

Complaints must be in writing, include any supporting documentation and should be sent to Civica Election Services. Email unison@cesvotes.com

Any queries about this information or this election should be directed to the Member Liaison Unit. Email: NEC21election@unison.co.uk Tel: 020 7121 5399





WE MADE HISTORY!

Two stories raised their heads above the Covid fog. One was coverage of Trump's tantrums and the other was the election of Christina McAnea, UNISON's first female general secretary. **Mary Maguire** reports

As King James (of England and Scotland fame) said in 1616: "No news is better than evil news". Today we say "no news is good news" with real conviction. We are bombarded with a daily diet of coronavirus statistics. How many new cases; how many deaths; how many in hospital; how do we compare with the rest of the world? Tiers follow lockdown, and lockdown follows tiers, as sure as night follows day.

Editors' appetites are insatiable for every conceivable angle on the longest-running story since the second world war. Anyone who has ever uttered a word about the virus, whether sensible or idiotic, is given column inches and airtime. From footballers to politicians, from doctors to plumbers, from ICU nurses to butchers, from boffins to economists, to covid-deniers and anti-vaxxers - they all get to put in their tuppence-worth.

The language used is reminiscent of war. There's a war cabinet, there's volunteers doing "their bit". Patients are described as fighting the virus. There are horror stories from care-workers on the front-line (The Times, Mirror.) There's talk of heroic efforts of ambulance workers (Independent) or shop-workers (Hull Daily Mail). Are we winning the battle against the virus? asks BBC News. Opinion is divided, with the Huddersfield Examiner publishing a map of the region that shows "Yorkshire is winning the battle against the second wave", whereas the Doncaster Star reports of "losing the battle (as the death toll rises again)".

A new vocabulary has entered daily use: covidiot; furlough; social bubbles; lockdown; Pfizer; Astrazeneca; pandemic; WFH; PPE; self-isolate and social distance. And, my all-time favourite: You're on mute (wishful thinking).

How does any other story compete with a

global pandemic that has killed millions? Well, a story was unfolding across the pond, of the leader of the free world having (another) tantrum. Young Donald did not want to leave the White House when he was booted out by the American electorate. Initially, his theatrical antics were entertaining, but then they took on a more sinister and dangerous tone and incited his armed-to-the-teeth supporters to violence.

As the Yorkshire Post commented: "Trump broke free from his bunker, kicking and screaming. This pathetic excuse of a man is not fit for office. (President Trump) was not simply behaving like a baby spitting out his dummy when he thought he couldn't get his own way. He was in full playground bully mode."

Dubbed the biggest, sorest loser by media around the world, the Telegraph & Argus was able to report that the "Donald Trump baby blimp has been consigned to history. Following its global tour ... the huge inflatable depicting the US President in a nappy and mobile phone" will rest in the Museum of London as a reminder of the fight against the "politics of hate".

And then finally, there was another story that managed to break through the Covid barrier. It had what all editors like - a first. Yes, you've guessed it. In an election, that lasted almost as long as the US presidential election, UNISON members voted for their first female general secretary - Christina McAnea. The BBC's announcement, "UK's biggest union elects first woman leader" was echoed across all the national media and across the region. The Ilkley Gazette pointed out that Christitina beat three other candidates to succeed Dave Prentis and the Wakefield Express, among others, quoted Christina's remarks: "We made history".

Well done, Christina. And well done, Yorkshire & Humberside region for nominating her. ■



HOW DOES ANY OTHER STORY COMPETE WITH A GLOBAL PANDEMIC?



Mary Maguire



www.yorks-unison.org.uk

NEW DAWN, NEW DAY

UNISON's first female general secretary sets out her plans for the union and pays tribute to the activists of Yorkshire & Humberside. **Mary Maguire** catches up with the newly-elected Christina McAnea

Christina McAnea, elected UNISON general secretary to succeed Dave Prentis, has made history as the first woman to hold the post. In a long drawn-out election campaign that kicked off in the middle of last year, Christina saw off three male rivals in a decisive win.

I caught up with Christina the day after the results to talk about her plans. Christina had spent a whirlwind day of radio, TV and newspaper interviews, ranging from the Mirror to Radio 4's Today programme. Media interest has been huge as the first woman general secretary to be elected in any of the big four industrial unions.

Christina said: "I am so grateful and proud that so many people put their trust in me to lead UNISON. Thank you to all those members in Yorkshire & Humberside who helped make history by electing me as their first woman general secretary. And to every member who took part in the election: I won't let you down".

Paying tribute to her predecessor, she said: "Dave has been a brilliant general secretary. And he has left UNISON in great shape – a growing, relevant and respected union. It's been an honour to work with him over the past 30 years".

Two of the first people to congratulate Christina were

regional convenor, Wendy Nichols and Yorkshire ambulance's Bryn Webster. As is the norm these days, Christina had to satisfy herself with celebrating quietly at home in the evening with husband Robert, son Michael and via Zoom link with daughter Tash in Glasgow. And she managed a quick celebratory call with her election campaign team. Then it was back to work.

No stranger to hard graft, Christina grew up in Drumchapel, a big, tough council housing estate in Glasgow where most people worked in the Clyde shipyards or local factories. Her mother worked as a school cleaner and dinner lady and brought up Christina and her two brothers and sister virtually single-handedly.

Christina left school at 16, worked in the NHS, civil service and in shops before putting herself through university. With a degree in English and history, Christina first worked as a housing officer at Glasgow city council, before starting work in the union movement.

Christina has spent most of her working life in UNISON and predecessor NALGO. Starting off as women's officer, she has worked across all the sectors, negotiating better pay, conditions and pensions for members. Regarded as a skilled and tough negotiator, she was appointed assistant general secretary in 2018,

with a wide-ranging brief dealing with bargaining, negotiations and equalities.

During the Covid-19 crisis, Christina has been the voice of health and social care workers, highlighting the crisis in care, demanding PPE, safe working conditions and providing advice and support to members.

So, naturally, top of Christina's in-tray is making sure UNISON continues to support members who are dealing with the pandemic, and to hold the government to account.

"Supporting public service workers through the pandemic, securing an early pay rise for NHS staff and ensuring the government backs down on its plans for an ill-judged pay freeze will be my immediate priorities," says Christina. "Our members have made huge sacrifices and put themselves at risk. I won't let this government, or any future government, forget that."

"Pushing for the funding and the political will to create a high quality, affordable universal social care service, where staff are respected and paid fairly, comes close behind."

Christina is keen, too, to make an early start on her plans to set up a national UNISON college giving members access to good training and development.

"So many members left school with no formal qualifications and



UNISON
MEMBERS
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work in low-paid, low-skilled jobs, with little chance of promotion into better paid jobs," says Christina. "UNISON has helped thousands through our return to learn programme. I want to go further. The college won't be a physical building in London or some big city. It will offer on-line workshop-based learning across hundreds of subject areas whether it's union development, representing members, or personal or professional development."

Once life gets back to normal, Christina plans to visit every region, meet regional council members, staff, and branch activists. Devolution is on the agenda and how to give a greater voice to regions and devolved nations, including the nine

English regions, so that they can "preserve their identity", but retain "consistency in standards and quality of service to members".

Yorkshire & Humberside is high on the list, where Christina is really looking forward to working with John Cafferty, "one of our most experienced regional secretaries" and to Wendy Nichols and John Campbell "for whom I have huge respect – the people to go to for advice".

On that early agenda, too, is giving branches greater resources to be able to represent every single member, no matter where they work or in what group. She wants to encourage more members to take part in the union's activities and democracy.

"I want to look at more fundamental reasons why members don't participate in the union," she says. "I want to make sure the union is more representative of them; to ask what they want out of the union and what really matters. Whether it's about protection, health and safety, better pay and conditions or better investment in public services.

"UNISON members want their union to put them first, as workers and retired workers. That's our common ground. That's what matters, not internal Labour Party processes, nor what other unions are doing, nor those who try to force their organisation's policies on our union. And that's how the members will judge me." □



TO EVERY
MEMBER
WHO TOOK
PART IN THE
ELECTION:
I WON'T LET
YOU DOWN



ALL THE BEST DAVE!

Active! consulting editor **Mary Maguire** worked closely with Dave Prentis as UNISON's national head of press and media. Here Mary pays tribute to the recently retired Yorkshire-born general secretary

Our Dave finally signed off as general secretary of UNISON at the end of January after 20 years in the top job and nearly 48 years dedicated to working for the union.

Born and brought up in Leeds, Dave started working for founder union, NALGO in 1972. His mission: to bring further vocational education to members and to equip activists and shop stewards with the skills to take on the bosses.

It wasn't long before Dave was taking on the bosses himself. Appointed to the negotiating team of the union, Dave soon gained a reputation for tenacity and perseverance, traits that many bosses and politicians would come to rue.

During the Thatcher era, Dave was heavily involved in organising campaigns of opposition to privatisation of the utilities and to the introduction of the market into local government, education and the NHS. He was the union official responsible for authorising industrial action, along with the lay members of the strike committee.

In 1990, Dave was appointed NALGO deputy general secretary and led on the negotiations with Tom Sawyer of NUPE, and Colm O'Kane of COHSE to hammer out a new super-union for modern times, with equalities at its heart. It was excruciating at times, but after three years of talks, three sets of annual conferences and ballots

of all three unions, UNISON was born.

Tom Sawyer said of Dave: "Dave had the toughest job ... he represented the biggest union that was not affiliated to the Labour Party... but he was determined to find solutions to the many problems. He really wanted the new union to succeed".

As UNISON deputy general secretary, Dave drove through a strategic review of functions, oversaw the gradual coming together of UNISON branches and strengthened campaigning on public services, equalities and recruitment.

When that other Yorkshire son, the late Rodney Bickerstaffe, known to all as "Bick", announced his retirement as general



DAVE WAS TOLD HE HAD STOMACH CANCER AND HAD JUST WEEKS TO LIVE, BUT HE DIDN'T GIVE UP



Dave leaves a great legacy

secretary, Dave stood for election and won.

Sickness followed success. Dave was told he had stomach cancer and had just weeks to live, but he didn't give up. He faced down the challenge and after six months took up the post on January 1, 2001.

Bick had won his goal of a statutory national minimum wage. Dave was keen to build on that legacy and launched the campaign for a living wage with two major concerts in Newcastle and Manchester.

Dave was never afraid to take on governments and bosses. The Blair government was no exception. An elder statesman of the "awkward squad", Dave won many votes at Labour Party conferences that changed policy,

including best value in local government, better protection for the two-tier workforce and against foundation hospitals. He led the UNISON contingent on marches in Glasgow and London against the war in Iraq.

From the union's Positively Public to Keep Public Services Public to the Million Voices campaigns, Dave has been a keen supporter of using the most innovative methods of publicising the union's campaigns and speaking up for members. From TV advertising, to massive banners on the side of the old Euston road building, to a touring bus, to giant purple balloons and banners, giant cheques and a myriad of picture stunts, Dave used them all.

The austerity years of Cameron/Clegg, May and then Johnson led to Dave setting up a £20m fighting fund to protect members and services. He led strikes on pay and pensions, joined members on picket lines, spoke at conferences, in the media, at Glastonbury and Tolpuddle, marched, rallied and constantly pushed the case for public services.

One of his biggest triumphs was defeating the government in the Supreme Court over employment tribunal fees. The case took four years and even when UNISON lost three times in lower courts, Dave kept the faith and it paid off.

Over his lifetime of service to the union, Dave has been instrumental in improving the pay, conditions, pensions and life chances of millions. He's fought racism, xenophobia, unequal pay and injustice all along the way. And he has represented UNISON at home and abroad on many

public bodies and trade union organisations.

A surprise Zoom party – the party of choice for lockdown – attended by staff, past and present, and NEC members, was held on the eve of Dave's retirement. Yorkshire & Humberside regional convenor, Wendy Nichols, paying tribute to Dave, recalled when they first met:

"Me from NUPE and him from NALGO, I wasn't sure how we would get on, but Cliff helped (the late Cliff Williams, regional secretary at the time). Mind you, it also helped that we were both from Yorkshire. We have become firm friends over those 25 years. We've had hard times together and sad times together, but we've come through them.

"Dave, you are exactly the kind of trade union leader that people like us want – not someone who bangs the drum, gets us walking up the hill and then forgets about us for their own ends. You have always put our members first and for that you have the respect of our members. It's been a pleasure to work with you."

Twenty years' ago when he had that cancer diagnosis and was told to go home and put his house in order, he didn't. He demanded treatment and he got it from our fantastic NHS. And that is the measure of our Dave. That's what he brought to the job – always demanding the best for his members, demanding a fairer deal, demanding better pay, demanding better conditions. Dave just doesn't take no for an answer.

Dave leaves a great legacy – a growing, vibrant, responsive, respected union – with modern, well-equipped buildings. Cheers and good luck, Dave. □



DAVE
JUST
DOESN'T
TAKE NO
FOR AN
ANSWER



THEY CAN'T STOP THE CLOCK

Pandemic or no pandemic, workers are still covered by working time regulations. **Richard Arthur**, head of trade union law at Thompsons Solicitors, sets out your rights and how to enforce them

Some workers have been furloughed in the pandemic - which has brought its own unique pressures. Others have worked throughout and have had to deal with demanding and erratic hours, in many cases filling in for absent colleagues.

So, what is the law on working time and how does it apply in a pandemic?

The bottom line is that the pandemic has not suspended any of the laws around contracts of employment. Pandemic or not, your first

port of call is to check your contract of employment to understand what should be happening. In addition to this, you can refer to the Working Time Regulations (WTR), which continue to apply throughout the pandemic.

Your contract should specify what your normal working hours are, either in terms of total time in a week, or hours in a day.

If the contract is very specific about your hours, then in the absence of any valid variation to those terms, your contractual

hours continue as before.

If your contract only sets out minimum or maximum hours, but not when they are to be worked over a week, then the option to alter shift patterns is always open to an employer regardless of COVID-19.

Most employment contracts include a clause that states that the employees' working hours are subject to the needs of the business. So as long as an employer keeps its demands within the hours specified for a week, it can make changes. If shift



YOUR CONTRACT SHOULD SPECIFY YOUR NORMAL WORKING HOURS



patterns are fixed by the contract, then they can only be changed by agreement (or by termination and re-engagement).

Working Time Regulations apply to all workers and specify an entitlement to an uninterrupted rest break of 11 hours in every 24 hours and an uninterrupted 24 hours in each seven-day period. This can also be taken as two uninterrupted rest breaks of 24 hours, or one 48-hour uninterrupted rest break in a 14-day period. In addition to this,

for every six hours worked, an employee must receive a rest break.

The regulations also limit the hours in an average working week to 48, and provide for other rights, including the provision of 28 days' paid annual leave a year and free health assessments for night workers.

So what do you do if your employer ignores your contract or the WTR?

Firstly, you need to understand whether shift patterns are a term of your contract. If so, any change should be subject to consultation and agreed by the parties. The discussion should be on what the likely impact of the change will be and what the alternatives are. The employer could suggest seeking volunteers first and they should suggest a time limit.

Any change which is agreed or permitted by the contract - even if it is temporary - should be recorded in writing (preferably as part of a collective agreement) and have a start and end date. Agreements 'subject to review' should be avoided as reviews have a funny habit of never taking place and temporary changes treated as permanent may be harder to challenge later.

A change to start and finish times could be discriminatory if, for example, it puts women responsible for caring or disabled workers at a particular disadvantage. To mitigate this, the employer must consider reasonable adjustments.

Visit Thompsons' legal guide online for more

information on Working Time Regulations, including details on annual leave entitlement, rights for night workers, how the regulations are enforced and time limits to make a claim.

In the event of a breach of the Working Time Regulations, the worker should raise a grievance with their employer via their UNISON rep, asking for it to be rectified immediately. If the employer refuses, then the worker can take a claim to an employment tribunal.

Employees may also bring a claim for unfair dismissal if they are dismissed because they complained about a breach of the regulations by the employer.

Claimants can ask the tribunal to make a "declaration" that their employer refused to allow them to exercise their rights under the regulations. Tribunals can make an award, based on what is "just and equitable in all the circumstances".

At Thompsons, we're proud to provide legal protection for UNISON members - who play such a valuable role in our society.

We understand the impact austerity, pay-cuts, long working-hours and poor working conditions are having on public service workers who despite all their trials and tribulations are keeping us safe, educated, healthy and cared for.

Those workers who give so much, deserve only the very best legal backing. That's why UNISON provides free legal advice and protection to thousands of members across Yorkshire and Humberside. □



REVIEWS
HAVE
A FUNNY
HABIT
OF NEVER
TAKING
PLACE



Richard Arthur

Photo: Vicky Matthews



HAYLEY'S ON CALL AND ON THE BALL

Whether as 999 call handler, UNISON rep, or part-time chicken fancier, Hayley Booth needs all her skill, empathy and patience.

Helen Hague meets a woman with unions in her genes

There's not much that Hayley Booth doesn't know about call centres. She's worked in them since leaving school more than 20 years back – in retail, insurance, the mobile phone business and more.

But the job Hayley's been doing for the past eight years is in a call centre with a difference – one that has

nothing to do with selling. Hayley has been taking 999 and other calls from the public at West Yorkshire Police HQ in Wakefield.

She loved the job as soon as she started. And on top of the satisfaction of helping keep the public safe and fighting crime, there was an added bonus. For the first time in her working life, Hayley was encouraged to

join a union.

"I was never approached in the other jobs – there never seemed to be a union to join," she says. Once at police HQ she signed up for UNISON "on the first day of training".

She was soon learning the techniques and protocols needed to extract relevant information from callers so that the police can get to



SHE LOVED THE JOB AS SOON AS SHE STARTED

Hayley named her hen
'Edwina Chicken Curry'

the crime scene, road crash, break-in or other incident as quickly as possible.

As people who work in emergency call centres know all too well, speed and accuracy can save lives – and getting callers who may be too distressed to spell out exact locations and key facts to inform the police response, takes skill, empathy and patience.

Call takers grade the job initially – emergency, priority and standard – before a member of the dispatch team passes it onto officers who may upgrade the response.

Then it's back to incoming calls – not all of which are 999. Hayley says some people report quite serious sounding incidents on the 101 number, "because they don't think it's serious enough to call 999".

She loves the fact that you can't predict what will come next. A big crash on the M62 could generate 50 calls, the next call could be from a vulnerable woman who has finally plucked up the courage to report domestic abuse.

All "silent" 999 calls are sent through to the police. Some people ring, but don't speak. It can be for a number of reasons: perhaps the caller is frightened or unable to say anything; perhaps there is a criminal or an aggressor nearby; or the call might have been made by mistake. Whatever the circumstances, the police are best placed to investigate rather than fire or ambulance.

The one thing Hayley wasn't expecting, was a spate of calls from "neighbours reporting neighbours" for breaching Covid-19 lockdown rules – but then we are living in extraordinary times.

It can be a very stressful and emotionally demanding job – but there is support. Call handlers can take "time out" if necessary, after a particularly difficult call. Regular screen breaks are built into the work schedule. Working conditions are "much better" than those Hayley found in commercial call centres – and she believes strongly that all call centre workers would benefit from union membership.

The job can be very isolating, stressful and target-driven. In the non-unionised private sector, these stresses are often magnified. "In all call centres you can get distressing and abusive calls. There's not always the support for people."

Away from work, Hayley loves nothing better than going off for weekend breaks in the family caravan with her husband and young son to Yorkshire beauty spots. She also keeps chickens, one of which rejoices in the name "Edwina Chicken Curry". For our younger readers Edwina Currie was a particularly controversial Tory MP who resigned as a junior health minister in 1988. She was famous for saying that most egg production in the UK was infected with salmonella. The controversy gained her the nickname "Eggwina".

Currie was also the secret lover of Conservative prime minister John Major.

When at work, Hayley enjoys the camaraderie of teamwork at police HQ. Soon after she started the job, she was known as someone keen to help if colleagues needed a bit of support – a union natural, with a deep belief in the power of solidarity.

So it's hardly surprising that she was asked to become a UNISON rep. That was six years ago – and she's been a union rep for control and operations ever since. She keeps an eye on health and safety and she's also been women's officer for the past 18 months.

Union activism is in the blood. Hayley's father was active in the year-long miners' strike which started nearly 37 years ago. She has vivid memories of the picket line outside South Kirby pit – and there's even a family snap of Hayley, not yet four, sitting on miners' leader Arthur Scargill's shoulders. "My hair's in pigtails and I'm waving a flag", says Hayley.

During the strike she enjoyed having her union activist dad around during the day – and was proud of her nan who was getting stuck in at the local soup kitchen.

She also remembers the food parcels that would help cash-strapped striking miners' families like hers get fed through the week.

And when it came to choosing a union, UNISON came highly recommended – by her mother, a long-standing member who worked in school canteens.

Now Hayley will be working for members full time – for the time being at least. In January, she was due to start a twelve-month secondment as assistant branch secretary. "New Year, New Opportunity," says Hayley, who is more than up for the challenge. And, with her natural talents in supporting others and belief in worker solidarity, who knows where the year-long placement may lead... □



UNION
ACTIVISM
IS IN
THE BLOOD



'WE'RE KNACKERED!'

The Covid pandemic has taken a devastating toll on UNISON members in hospitals and care homes throughout Yorkshire & Humberside.

Peter Carroll and **Barrie Clement** give an update on the crisis

It was high summer when Active! last spoke to Intensive Care Nurse Janie Saxton about the huge pressure she and her colleagues faced on the Covid frontline.

She warned all those months ago that the deadly virus was far from over and things would get worse in our hospitals as the winter set in.

Since then, new variants of the virus have developed, infection rates have continued to rise and deaths from the virus have tragically risen to record levels.

UNISON member Janie said: "The emotional strain of working

in ICU at this time is taking its toll.

"Loads of nurses have left ICU because the pressure is enormous. Some of us understandably have had to move to less stressful nursing roles.

"It was feeling quite positive in Summer but now the virus is back in force and medical staff are just knackered. And sometimes it feels there's no light at the end of the tunnel.

"We all support each other. The strain comes in waves and some weeks people are fine and others they are not.

"I had to have a week off sick in

recent months. It does take a toll on us all."

ICU staff have been faced with heart breaking situations every day, dealing with distressed relatives desperate to say their goodbyes to loved ones.

They have had to explain why families cannot have direct contact with patients because of the strict restrictions in hospitals to fight the spread of Covid.

Nurses have had to hold mobile phones for patients so their families can say their last goodbyes.

Dealing with such human suffering, day in and day out,

completely lack empathy with those who are suffering most in this global crisis.

“Just because a patient is old or has a health condition doesn’t mean that their life matters less than anyone else’s.

“They are human beings, and they and their loved ones are going through a deeply painful and distressing experience.

“As an ICU nurse, to see and hear people who have no empathy is so frustrating because it means in many cases they’re ignoring safety rules and denying the science.”

She says it is “weird” that, as vaccines are developed which will be vital in stopping the spread of the virus, an anti-vaccine movement has emerged.

“I just don’t understand them. It is not a political construct to vaccinate against Covid.

“It is scientists who are making these vaccines, not politicians, so it’s weird that people should spread mistrust and false information.

Janie and her colleagues were due to receive their second jab as Active! went to press.

When we contacted her, she was tired after spending all day writing an essay. When she’s not

doing 12-hour shifts at the LGI and St James’s in Leeds, she is doing a course to keep her up to date with critical care procedures.

Janie said: “One week it looks at respiratory care, another renal or cardio care. Student ICU nurses attend and they have ‘preceptors’ to mentor them as they learn. “It’s all about keeping all that knowledge available to colleagues and sharing it to keep our skill levels high.

“So I hope people will bear us in mind in their daily lives and our growing number of ill patients. We are all working so hard to cope with this and I hope people will realise it, and play their part in keeping us all safe.”

Meanwhile the response to the pandemic in care homes has varied enormously throughout the region.

Last March most homes covered by UNISON’s North Yorkshire branch for instance, endured the same horrendous problems encountered elsewhere.

A shortage of PPE, hopelessly inadequate equipment and a tidal wave of elderly people with Covid discharged from hospitals into their care.

After that crisis had largely passed, branch officers like



gives Janie and her colleagues a grim understanding of how catastrophic the pandemic is.

And she is deeply troubled by those who question the reality of Covid and the toll it is taking on individuals and their families.

“It makes me quite angry when people are de-sensitised to the human costs of this,” she said.

“There are some people who seem to be saying those who are dying don’t matter because they either have underlying health conditions or simply that they are old.

“I can’t understand how they



Daniel Maguire (pictured right), began to notice other problems.

While UNISON has a good relationship with the primary employer, North Yorkshire County Council, the union identified a number of “rogue” employers running private care homes.

Some members who were showing Covid symptoms were told to isolate and ended up on £95 statutory sick pay. The government had made it clear that its infection control fund could be used to top up wages to the basic £350 a week.

But some disreputable care home companies, which said they were using the money to make up their employees’ pay, did no such thing.

“After we got in touch with them to point out the anomaly, Hey Presto they identified the money and our members got their full wages,” says Daniel.

Another problem which emerged, particularly in the private sector, was the impact on mothers-to-be, some of whom were unlawfully put under pressure to work on after their 28th week of pregnancy.

“Others were told to get a sick note, but pregnancy is not a sickness. It was amazing how ignorant some employers were about the rights of pregnant women.”

Other employees were told to work on, even if they were displaying Covid symptoms. “If nothing else, the pandemic has highlighted how fragmented the system is,” says Daniel. “Some private sector employers were naïve,



others were simply rogues. One or two have been forced to close down.”

He pays tribute to UNISON’s care home members: “When they were ringing us up to express concerns, they also expressed deep concern about the people they look after and their families. It all took its toll. Quite often our members were acting like surrogate families to those in their care. They’re such a great bunch of workers.”

Ironically – and perhaps predictably – Covid has had a hugely positive impact on UNISON membership. Branch secretary Wendy Nichols (pictured above) described how there has been a “fantastic” response.

Clearly the pandemic has led public service workers generally to appreciate the benefit - if not the necessity - of union membership. The 7,500-strong North Yorkshire branch has seen an unprecedented 1,000 new members join during 2020.

Says Wendy: “In small private care homes for instance, where there might have been one or two members, there are now four, five or six – and it’s not passive membership, they’re getting organised.”

It was expected that by the end of January all care home residents and employees in the area would have received a vaccine. Perhaps there is light at the end of the tunnel... □



THEY’RE SUCH A GREAT BUNCH OF WORKERS
Daniel Maguire





there for you

supporting UNISON members
when life gets tough

- Financial assistance
- Debt advice
- Wellbeing breaks
- Support & information

Please make sure our members are aware of the help that is available in these difficult times.

UNISON members struggling through an unexpected crisis can get help from 'there for you' by:-

- ☑ Contacting their Branch Welfare Officer
- ☑ Calling us on 020 7121 5620

You can also find out more information by visiting our website

www.unison.org.uk/get-help/help-with-problems-at-home/there-for-you/

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UNISON
the public service union

THE SPIRIT OF HULL

Royal Infirmary
Block 100m
er Wards & Departments
ncy Department
al Parking P
Hull Dialysis Unit →
men & Children's Hospital →



Photo: Sean Spencer

Staff nurse Matt Whale comes from a family that embodies the community ethos of Hull. UNISON activist Matt also finds time to be a fan of Hull Kingston Rovers... and Liverpool Football Club. **Ryan Fletcher** reports

Matt Whale has a long history of activism and the pandemic hasn't stopped him from working on behalf of UNISON members in the spare hours he has off from the infirmary's stroke ward.

"The second wave of coronavirus hit Hull hard – it was acutely felt at the hospital and was very difficult for staff.

"There were challenges in being able to provide advice and assistance to members in the normal manner because of social distancing," the 28-year-old staff nurse from East Hull explained.

"The union has a responsibility to keep people safe and minimise the strain on the NHS by working safely. But we've got to engage as well because unions have a crucial role to play in defending workers at this difficult time – the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated a lot of issues."

Matt has dealt with the

challenges posed by the pandemic at Hull Royal admirably, according to fellow activists. "If we had another 10 of Matt in Hull, we'd have the biggest trade union membership in the country," was a typical assessment.

CHANGES

Coming from a family of trade unionists – Matt's grandad, dad, uncle and aunt were all activists – he knew what to expect when he became a rep a year ago.

"There's a strong current in the family of knowing the importance of trade unionism. I decided to become a rep because I want to make a difference to my colleagues, from day-to-day things for members to campaigning for bigger changes in the NHS," says Matt.

"I also think it's important for the trade union movement to speak up on wider social issues as well. Trade unions have a role to play in bringing people together and putting forward a positive alternative for change."

Before qualifying as a nurse four years ago, Matt had a period of unemployment. Characteristically, he made the best out of a difficult situation and joined a Youth Fight for Jobs march from Jarrow to London.

The march followed in the footsteps of the legendary 1936 Jarrow Crusade, which saw 200 men walk from Tyne and Wear to the capital in protest at unemployment and poverty.

Closer to home, Matt helps to organise Hull's very

own annual trade union festival, Engage for Change. Established by the city's trade council during the City of Culture year in 2017, the popular annual event celebrates trade unionism in Hull with music, discussions and family activities.

"To me, the festival highlights the working-class solidarity that underpins what Hull is about as a city, whether it be on the docks or the headscarf revolutionaries like Lilian Bilocca, who fought for improved safety on the trawlers," Matt said.

"Unfortunately, the physical event was cancelled this year, but it will be back, and the plan is for Engage for Change to become a staple, not just in Hull, but at each of the big trade union events around the country."

DEVASTATION

It goes without saying that the coronavirus did more than disrupt events. As a volunteer with the UNISON-supported Unity Shop food bank in Hull, Matt has seen firsthand the devastation the pandemic has wrought on people's lives.

"The Unity Shop is a project of solidarity not charity. On the one hand it's great that the trade union movement has stepped up and done that. But on the other hand, it's an absolute disgrace that it's needed to do that," Matt said.

"What the pandemic has done is laid bare the insecurity and reality facing hundreds, if not thousands, of people in Hull and millions of others across the country. We live in a society,

and I include myself in this, where if you miss two or three pay cheques, you're facing the prospect of losing your home and not being able to feed your family."

When he's not working or volunteering, Matt is a big fan of Hull Kingston Rovers rugby league club. Following the Robins is another family tradition and Matt has been going to games since before he can remember.

"I'm a Liverpool FC fan having been born there, but we moved to Hull and my grandad used to go home and away to Rovers. He took me when I was a wee nipper and I was absolutely transfixed. I've been hooked ever since," said Matt.

As well as the game itself, Matt is also enthusiastic about the rugby league's roots in working people standing together to improve their situation. Established in 1895, rugby league was born when clubs in the North of England broke away from the Rugby Football Union. The split occurred because 'Northern Union' clubs wanted working-class players to be compensated for taking time off from their jobs and for the inevitable injuries.

Matt said: "Back then rugby was a game dominated by doctors, lawyers and business people who could take time off to play. But it was the mill workers, dockers, fisherman and the miners of North England who created rugby league by saying 'no we need paying to be able to afford to do this'. I feel like that fighting working class spirit just runs through the city of Hull." □



UNIONS HAVE A CRUCIAL ROLE TO PLAY IN DEFENDING WORKERS AT THIS DIFFICULT TIME



THE PANDEMIC HAS LAID BARE THE INSECURITY FACING HUNDREDS IF NOT THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE IN HULL



Photo: Vicky Matthers

GETTING THINGS SORTED

Care worker Rebecca McManus is not shy of ‘pointing things out if they don’t look right’. **Helen Hague** talks to a woman who is not scared of challenging management

UNISON member Rebecca McManus has made a career of caring for others – after a brief stint in retail when she left school. “You have to care to work in care,” she says. “If you don’t care, you shouldn’t be there.”

For the past five

years Rebecca has been supporting adults with learning disabilities at Highfields day centre in Kirklees - where activities usually include bingo, art, craft and singalongs. She also drives the 16-seater bus – picking people up from their homes on the way to the centre each morning.

It’s a job she enjoys

– though the Covid pandemic has brought its own challenges. There are the temperature checks before pick-up. Then service-users and staff join their regular “bubbles” to minimise potential disease spread. Singalongs aren’t happening at the moment – though miming along to songs sometimes is. There



YOU HAVE TO CARE, TO WORK IN CARE

Rebecca enjoys reading Active! magazine: "It's got insights into normal people and it's not full of jargon. Not everyone's been to college or university."

are no group sessions. "Things are changing all the time and we have to adapt," says Rebecca, who, like all staff at the centre now wears a mask, gloves and pinnie while at work.

Her first job in care was as part of a rapid response emergency care team run by the council, working alongside the NHS. But with caring responsibilities at home – children Tomas, Rose and Logann – she couldn't work night shifts. She then switched to supporting people in their own homes, which she found hugely satisfying. "The clients were like family," she says. There were two shifts – "breakfast and dinner and then tea and bed" and bonds were soon forged.

But when the council contracted out home care to private companies, Rebecca switched to social care – and her job at the day centre. "Kirklees and UNISON support you – I don't think the private sector always does. I prefer to be in the public sector."

This strongly held belief may well have its roots in what Rebecca learned from her late father Jimmy Duckett, union activist with Nupe, one of the unions that came together to create UNISON. Jimmy was the caretaker at Huddersfield University.

"My dad was quite high up in Nupe," Rebecca says. "I went to London with him to meetings when I was little – though I'd sit outside. He always looked after other people. He was quite passionate and vocal and believed the union was there to help everybody.

But he didn't like it when people only joined when they needed help." She learned those values when she was growing up.

CREDENTIALS

Rebecca herself has not been afraid to speak out when needed – especially when things need clarifying. She is unashamedly a woman with her own views. "I like things to be done right and I like looking after people – I'm not a follower or someone who wants to save the world. If I believe in it, I will support it." She "likes to get things done" and "get things sorted before they escalate" – pretty sound credentials when you will be representing members' interests.

Even before she was approached about standing for office, she wasn't shy of "pointing things out if they didn't look right". She notices inconsistencies and has never been afraid to ask questions of team leaders and higher management if she feels they need to be asked.

She is among the growing number of UNISON members who have reconnected with education since going on the Women's Lives and other free courses provided by the union. She joined up to study, went on the residential weekend and was keen to sign up for more. She has since gone on to take a course in basic English through the union and is keen to delve deeper into words and their meanings.

"I'd put myself forward for more courses, but

Covid put an end to that," she says. For the time being. But she plans to take the GCSEs she missed out on first time round.

UNISON courses get the message across that it's never too late to learn. "I'm 45 and I'm just enjoying learning," says Rebecca, who has always loved history. She is interested in other people's stories – and she says she enjoys reading this magazine: "It's got insights into normal people and it's not full of jargon. Not everyone's been to college or university."

ACTIVITIES

The pandemic has thrown a much-needed spotlight on the essential work done by low-paid frontline workers who have kept things going – the nurses, the refuse collectors, the shop workers, the people working in old people's homes.

And, of course, those providing support, care, therapies and activities for learning disabled adults. At the Highfields Day Centre, services are still being provided for people with challenging behaviour and additional needs.

Rebecca, and the members she will now represent at the centre, are among the frontline workers soldiering on as the pandemic spreads. She's proved she's no stranger to speaking out when she thinks things need challenging. Now, following approaches from the union, she feels ready to step up as shop steward and health and safety rep – supporting members – and speaking out when necessary. And Rebecca can't wait to get stuck in. □



"I LIKE THINGS TO BE DONE RIGHT AND I LIKE LOOKING AFTER PEOPLE"

Photo: Mark Harvey

PRICE OF COURAGE

Standing up to management can come at a high personal cost. **Christine Buckley** hears the story of senior activist, meat hygiene inspector and proud Welshman John Price

UNISON rep John Price has been put through the mill for his union activities. Two years ago, the meat hygiene inspector for the Food Standards Agency (FSA), who has been a shop steward for more than 20 years, felt unfairly disciplined over his union activism.

It started as a seemingly innocuous incident. At work in an abattoir where birds were being slaughtered, there was a session on wearing face masks to make the area safer. Diseases such as the harmless-sounding “pigeon fancier’s lung”, picked up from the dry and dusty conditions in which birds live, can be deadly.

One person testing the masks didn’t seem to take the exercise completely seriously by also wearing a false beard. A manager decided John was responsible for the breach of discipline, even though he had behaved properly. Prior to the clash a manager queried the fact that everyone who had applied for workplace training had been put forward by John.

UNISON took up the issue with the chief executive of the FSA, but was unable to resolve it. So John began a grievance procedure. That too proved unsatisfactory. The union then pushed for an independent investigation which was carried out by an impartial party working for the Home Office.

Finally, that investigation found in John’s favour, taking issue with the decisions of managers. As a consequence John lodged a complaint with an employment tribunal and accepted an out of court

settlement and apology from the FSA.

Crucially, he also kept his job. It was a remarkable achievement, but it took its toll. The stress of the fight led to John taking three months off work. During that time, he suffered from depression and rarely left the house. "As a union rep you have responsibility to members to represent them," he says. "If you've been too scared to do it, it impacts on how you feel about yourself."

Now, John is glad to put the whole difficult episode behind him and continues to represent UNISON members. John says the case the union pursued has protected him and other stewards within the FSA because it has improved industrial relations. He says if it wasn't for the help of regional organiser Rianne Hooley it could have been a very different story.

Keeping his job was important for the 58-year-old Welshman, not only because it is his livelihood, but also because he's worked hard to make his way up to his current position after leaving school with few qualifications or prospects.

As a 16-year old in the mining area of the Amman valley, Carmarthenshire, his mother was adamant that he wouldn't go down the mines, like so many young men did. His father had died from the lung disease pneumoconiosis.

Instead, John began working in butchers' shops and doing other work. In 1996 he grasped the chance to work for the civil service as a meat technician and then inspector for the then Meat Hygiene Service.

At that time there was a surge in demand for meat hygiene officers as the BSE epidemic (known at the time as "mad cow disease") gripped beef farming in the UK.

John secured the job because of his butchery skills. Normally when the need for meat hygiene specialists wasn't so high, he would have needed several 'O' levels.

A year after joining the Meat Hygiene Service (which in 2000 was absorbed into the newly created FSA) John became a shop steward. Twelve years later he swapped one traditional mining area for another and moved to Doncaster, so that his wife Christine, an HR manager, and their daughters Hannah and Emily could be closer to family in Sheffield. John and Christine now have grandchildren Amelia, three, and Arthur, seven months.

They have settled into Yorkshire well, although John is amused that people can still struggle to understand his accent. "I like the people here, they're down to earth and have a good work ethic." John's own work ethic has not only drawn him to pursue

his career, but also to play a big part in UNISON.

Apart from his long service as a shop steward he was also elected the regional convenor for members in the Meat Hygiene Service for the whole of Wales and is now on the union's national service group executive.

Perhaps his drive could stem from his interesting family ancestry. At one stage his great grandfather John Colton, a Scottish anarchist, trade unionist and coal miner married the Russian-born Emma Goldman, a famous anarchist and human rights activist who emigrated to the US. In fact it was a marriage in legal terms only, to give her British citizenship and there were no children.

But even though he's not a blood relation of Ms Goldman, like her he is clearly a born fighter, battling for justice at work and highlighting how the union stands by its reps. "You can't do this sort of thing by yourself," he says. "The cost of it for one thing would break most people but the most important thing is all the support you get from being in a union. That's what I tell people from my own experience now." □

John's CV

John left Pontardawe comprehensive school aged 16 with four CSEs. Working life started as a butcher's assistant in Pontardawe Co-op where he joined his first union, Usdaw. Aged 18 he moved to another small independent butcher's shop. He has also worked for Tesco and Booker cash and carry shops. Aged 27 he married Christine, a Yorkshire woman he had met in his local rugby club. He started working for the Meat Hygiene Service at the age of 35, first as a meat technician and then progressing to meat inspector. He joined UNISON immediately and a year later became a steward. Two years later he was elected UNISON regional convenor for meat hygiene members in Wales. In 2009 he moved to Doncaster for family reasons, joining the Wakefield branch of UNISON.



THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS ALL THE SUPPORT YOU GET FROM BEING IN A UNION



I LIKE THE PEOPLE HERE, THEY'RE DOWN TO EARTH



ALL TO PLAY FOR

The political reckoning over the Covid pandemic and Boris Johnson's hapless premiership is fast approaching in national and council elections. Mirror man **Paul Routledge** takes a look at the runners and riders

“
OPINION
POLLS
PUT THE
PARTIES
ALMOST
NECK
AND NECK

It's already being called "Super Thursday" and it will feel like a mini-general election. More than forty million people are likely to vote in Britain on May 6, in polls postponed for a year because of the pandemic. They will decide control of 140 councils across the country. There are also parliamentary elections in Scotland and Wales, for London mayor and for police and crime commissioners.

This day of political reckoning will be the first big test of Sir Keir Starmer's leadership of the Labour party, and the first opportunity that voters will have to pass a verdict

on the Tories' handling of the pandemic and the economic recession hitting jobs and public services. Opinion polls put the parties almost neck and neck, but Boris Johnson's premiership is poorly rated. People have seen through his arm-waving, blustering showmanship, and even some of his own MPs doubt if he's the man for the job. Former Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt, his rival for the Conservative leadership is "on manoeuvres", as they say in Westminster. He voted with Labour on the Universal Credit issue.

Although national issues will dominate these polls, there is one big local contest

bidding for headlines: the fight to become West Yorkshire's first directly-elected metro-mayor. Coronation Street star Tracey Brabin is taking on Boris Johnson's candidate. She starts as odds-on favourite, and her performance could determine whether the Tory onslaught on Labour's so-called "Red Wall" that gifted them nine parliamentary seats in our region is a permanent shift in political geography, or simply a flash in the pan.

Tracey is MP for the constituency of Batley and Spen and unlike Dan Jarvis, MP for Barnsley Central and mayor of Sheffield City Region - has promised to



ONE BIG LOCAL CONTEST IS BIDDING FOR THE HEADLINES

resign from Parliament if she wins. That would trigger a by-election in a seat where Labour suffered a swing against of nearly 13 per cent in 2019, with a majority cut to only 3,525, and where the Tories have won in the past. This time, there would not be a Brexit Party candidate drawing support away from the government and who knows where the 6,400 votes given to the mysterious Heavy Woollen District Independents would go? By-elections are notoriously unpredictable.

In the council elections, Labour has a tough challenge on its hands in Yorkshire and Humberside. The party is defending seats won at a high water-mark of popularity that delivered control in Leeds, Sheffield, Wakefield, Hull, Kirklees and Calderdale, and substantial representation in York and Humberside authorities. The Tories are banking on a “Boris bounce” after a successful vaccination campaign, to win back ground in town and City halls.

Conservative MPs have formed a Northern Research Group, fronted by ex-minister Jake Berry, a Lancashire MP who did more than anybody to frustrate One Yorkshire devolution. Modelled on the loony-Right European Research Group, it has signally failed to translate slogans into reality.

Forget the propaganda about “levelling up” the North and building new railways. It won’t happen. The HS2 extension from Birmingham to Yorkshire has been shunted into the sidings to save money. Even



Tracey Brabin will resign as an MP if she wins

the £18 million new platform 0 at Leeds station won’t open for services until next year.

The pandemic is still the number one issue in the public mind. More than 10,700 people have died from Covid-19 in Yorkshire hospitals. More than 307,000 have contracted the virus. Infection rates were still high while I was writing, but predicted to fall as the impact of Lockdown Three was felt, and the NHS Covid-jab operation worked through the age groups.

One familiar face will not return. Judith Blake, Labour leader of Leeds City Council since 2015 and a councillor for 24 years is quitting to go to the House of Lords. Her successor will have to cope with huge financial problems in the city, resulting from Tory funding cuts and pandemic spending.

Looking to the longer term, Sir Keir Starmer promises us he’ll be visiting the region. Local links are strong - his mother hails from Doncaster and he attended Leeds University. Visiting Donny, he said : “It’s going to be hard graft

every week, every month and every year until 2024. I’m going to spend a lot of time in Yorkshire. Seriously, we will be here a lot.”

Relations between the Labour party and the unions came under intense scrutiny during UNISON’s general secretary election, which returned Christina McAnea to the top job in succession to Dave Prentis.

Ms McAnea was described as a pragmatic leader who would be supportive of Sir Keir, but she insists that her first priority is looking after the members, and after that boosting the NHS and social care. I think she’s right.

Our regional convenor Wendy Nichols plays an important role on the party’s national executive, but with no general election likely before 2024, there are more important, immediate issues to be faced than UNISON’S long-term links with Labour. Chancellor Rishi Sunak promised “an end to austerity” and promptly imposed a nationwide wage freeze on the public sector.

UNISON has joined other unions in a letter to the prime minister, urging him to intervene to give NHS workers a promised wage increase now, rather than wait for a Pay Review Board report not due until May. “It’s in the prime minister’s gift to speed up the pay process,” say union leaders. “A wage rise won’t stop the virus, but it will show exhausted staff the government cares.”

A politically-smart premier would act on that plea. We shall see. □



Photo: Vicky Matthers

50 YEARS' SERVICE!

After half a century of loyalty and dedication to UNISON and previously NALGO, Pam Wells has called it a day. Name a job at branch level - and she's almost certainly done it says **Barrie Clement**

You can picture the scene. It was a NALGO branch meeting more than 30 years ago at council offices in Leeds city centre. The smoke-filled, dingy basement room was full of "old farts" as Pam Wells describes them. The chair of the branch, unusually a woman, had decided to make an announcement ahead of formal proceedings. "The main thing you ought to know about me," she told them, "is that I'm a lesbian".

You would hope that such a statement nowadays would be unremarkable – or

greeted with admiration for the woman's bravery. In those days the branch chair, Penny Chatterton, was courageous indeed.

"It was very male-orientated in those days and this branch was not only made up of men, they were old men in suits. Some of the men at the meeting hung their heads, but some were really livid.

"But Penny was a very, very, strong character and wanted to wake them up to a changed world. Penny really inspired me. She was such a breath of fresh air."

Pam, 68, has spent 50-odd years in the labour

movement since she joined the Yorkshire Electricity Board in 1968.

She was "actively encouraged" to join a union, so became a member of NALGO, a forerunner of UNISON and six months later she was a steward.

Eventually Pam was moved to the Limewood Approach office in Leeds and became the steward for the building. One incident stands out during her time there.

A senior manager had angered staff because of his favouritism towards a female junior manager. Pam tried all the usual formal



PENNY REALLY INSPIRED ME. SHE WAS SUCH A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

channels to tackle what was a highly sensitive issue.

Her efforts came to naught, so she consulted the branch chair and a full time officer about the possibility of a walkout. She was warned about the repercussions of such action, but if that was the only solution, she was told to press ahead with it.

So she held a meeting of the staff. "We'd all had enough of the blatant favouritism, so we voted for the stoppage. That lunchtime more than 20 of us walked out on to the pavement.

"After about ten minutes senior managers from headquarters drove up in their cars and so did Cliff Williams who was then regional secretary.

"Me and the branch chair were called into a meeting and it was decided that one of the managers would be 'spoken to' - and the other moved elsewhere." It was a lesson in solidarity.

During her time with UNISON, she has been branch chair and branch education officer among other posts and has attended numerous national conferences and seminars.

Pam always believed she could not expect respect from members. "You've got to earn it," she says. And whenever a member came to her with a complaint, she would always ask if the person had spoken to the line manager before taking up the issue.

In 2000, following a cutback in her section, Pam was made redundant and the Yorkshire Electricity branch approached her to work part-time for them as development officer. Initially it was to be for a couple of years, but it turned out to be more than 20.

"I think I have pretty much done everything whilst working for the branch, not just as admin and development, but recruitment and representing members and sitting on the negotiating bodies."

While the male domination she experienced in the early days, is less marked, she believes there is still a long way to go. "In our branch we have done our best to encourage women, but it's not always easy especially in small branches and we need more women to get involved.

"I understand UNISON's approach to women's involvement, but the most important thing is to have people who are willing and able to represent members.

"I cannot emphasise strongly enough why you should be a member of a trade union. It has helped me and my family on a number of occasions."

Recently Pam decided to retire. One of the reasons is that Npower, the biggest employer in her branch, is about to be taken over by E.ON and it felt like the right time to go.

Four years ago she suffered from angina and had to have stents fitted to her heart, so she clearly needs to take it easier.

Another reason for leaving is that she wants more "me time". She says: "I want to wake up in the morning and say to myself, I'll do what I want to do today."

She and her husband - they have no children - are rugby union enthusiasts - and particularly fond of the kind of expansive, dynamic rugby they play in New Zealand - a country to which they might have emigrated some time ago.

Pam, who lives in Wetherby, is also a member of Yorkshire County Cricket Club and intends to spend her summers with her husband watching county cricket.

But you can't keep a good woman down and when the pandemic is over she intends to volunteer at Harrogate Hospital. "It's something I've always wanted to do," she says.

Her time as a UNISON stalwart will be remembered by her colleagues and friends. Regional convenor Wendy Nichols thanked Pam for her long service.

"Pam is the kind of person who makes our union tick. She will be sorely missed, but after more than 50 years she certainly deserves a rest." □



PAM IS THE KIND OF PERSON WHO MAKES OUR UNION TICK

Wendy Nichols

PAM'S RECORD

Pam started work at the Yorkshire Electricity Board in 1968 and after around six months she became a steward. After two years, she was moved to the Limewood Approach, Leeds Office and became the steward for that building. She then moved to Castleford when the company split into two she became the steward at Castleford for members in Yorkshire Electricity Distribution. In 2000 Pam was made redundant and the branch approached her to work part time as the branch development officer. Initially it was only meant to be for a couple of years, but she stayed until the end of 2020.



Barrie Clement



THE MINISTRY OF LIES

Through bigotry, stupidity and deliberate misrepresentation, the Tories and their allies have conjured up images of northern cities which no-one up here would recognise. **Peter Carroll** vents his spleen

You could almost feel the shockwaves pulsing through Bradford on that fateful morning of January 2.

A bleary and Covid-weary population awoke to the chilling news that their city was the fourth worst place to live in the whole country.

An appalled evening paper immediately issued a

call to arms: it was time for all good Bradfordians and true to take to the internet and the airwaves and tell the world why they thought their city was an excellent place to live.

The condemnation of Bradford (and the other cities deemed to be in the relegation zone) was the result of a poll conducted by a "satirical website"

which concluded- in a sneering press release - that "Bradford is a good place to live if you want a takeaway or a Poundshop".

This sort of attack on post-industrial cities, predominantly in the North of England, is of course patronising, bigoted and plain stupid.

But there's been no scrutiny of the survey



THERE WAS PLENTY OF ACTIVITY FROM THE TROLLING COMMUNITY

methods used : What question(s) were asked in the survey, who were the people asked? Who funded the enterprise? And most importantly, what was the purpose, the genuine motivation, for doing it in the first place?

Given these serious misgivings, you would expect the media to ignore it. And then you remember the faith they place in political opinion polls at election times – knowing full well they are regularly and embarrassingly, completely inaccurate.

(Or as the clown in Downing Street would say: Polls provide, er, if you will, erm, a sort of “oven ready” source of world-beating material for journalists to keep the, you know, the er, the old pot boiling!)

Anyway, people did react to the story, with many proudly extolling the city’s numerous virtues: the warmth of the people, the splendour of its remaining Victorian architecture, the excellent restaurants, Bradford’s long-standing political commitment to creating peace and friendship between all communities, for example.

(I could go on, but I was born and live here and therefore am biased.)

And I also stoutly refuse to fall into the trap (as erm, ha! you’ve just, as it were, seen me do) of being defensive and angry about it.

But of course there was plenty of activity from the trolling community, following their well-earned rest after a gruelling few years of front-line action in the great patriotic crusade

to just “Get Brexit Done” – yes, those three little words that mean so little.

These grizzled veterans of the great war of words could pinpoint exactly why the London satirists found the place so economically dreary. Can you guess who they blame?

Of course you can – Bradford’s Asian community, again. And also Bradford’s Labour-controlled council for inflicting widespread poverty and insecurity on hundreds of thousands of citizens.

(Bradford Council’s central government funding has been slashed by almost 60 per cent in the last decade, with more cuts to come, creating crises in all its vital services).

And so we see once again the Government’s strategy, devised more than a decade ago, to starve local government of vital funding, sell every service to the private sector and persuade the public that the resultant squalor is actually the local authority’s fault.

It is a seemingly crude ploy, but it has worked well for the Tories, despite its obvious irrationality.

How did they manage it? Step forward the Behavioural Insights team, aka the Nudge Unit, set up by David Cameron in 2010.

Its declared purpose is “to influence public thinking and decision-making” and among other things works with job centres to “improve outcomes” (turning claims down regardless of validity, targeting the disabled, Universal Credit and all the other cruelties the government relished

inflicting on the weakest, was the result).

The Nudge Unit is now partly owned by the Cabinet Office, its employees and a private “social purposes company” called Nesta – a fiendishly complex financial construct which is not for the ordinary folk like us to worry about. Except when they are “nudged” to pay for it with their taxes.

At the highest level of this government we have people who think Orwell’s 1984 was advocating, not warning us off, a centralised autocracy bolstered by a brainwashing Ministry of Truth.

Those whose pots have been stirred, who have been nudged into action, may rise again to praise/rave against the city, even as they witness the effects of the government’s managed decline strategy continue its destruction.

A Declaration of interest: In the early 1980s a famous Bill Bryson travel book described Bradford as existing “only to make everywhere else in the country look good”. I was sent by the Bradford Telegraph & Argus to hit back. Bryson lived in hugely wealthy Holland Park so I went to look (“all the windows have electronic shutters. Who would want to live under siege?” etc.) Then I went to Harrods to write about its obscene annual sale (an elaborately carved kennel for £14,000 anybody?). Then I went to see my elder brother at the West End Hostel for homeless men, St Mungo’s, which he ran, and wrote an article about homelessness. They got their money’s worth way back then. □



IT IS A SEEMINGLY CRUDE PLOY, BUT IT HAS WORKED WELL FOR THE TORIES



PAUL ROUTLEDGE

MIRROR POLITICAL COLUMNIST

BOZO BOZZA FACES COVID GRILLING

We all know it was the “poor bloody infantry” - the public service workers - who saved the country from the worst effects of the coronavirus. Johnson and his incompetent cabinet however will face a grilling over their lamentable performance in a public inquiry - which could lead to the country’s first ‘pandemic poll’

There will be a public inquiry – as always in such cases – into the Covid war, and it will expose the guilt of the politicians. A senior judge will be hauled out of retirement to hear the evidence and apportion blame.

The truth can’t come soon enough, but Boris Johnson and his cronies have done their best to delay it for as long as possible. They hope the vaccines now bringing reassurance to millions will divert attention from their litany of failure: the lack of PPE equipment in the NHS, the shunting of virus-infected patients from hospital wards to care homes, the monumental cock-up of the education system.

And they will have to answer for the catastrophic “lockdown-open-up-lockdown-open-up” sequence of events and the lamentable performance of cabinet ministers, most notably the prime minister himself.

The contrast between the generals and the poor bloody infantry (to use an old World War One expression) couldn’t be greater. Our public service workers certainly didn’t fail us. During the long nightmare of the pandemic, the bins got collected, the hospitals coped with unparalleled challenges and the schools stayed open throughout for key workers

before welcoming back all the nation’s children. The public were heartfelt in their thanks.

But the governing politicians failed all of us. Well into 2021, they’re still scrambling to catch up with events, faffing around with restrictions that fail to meet the needs of the hour. Boris Johnson had plan after plan, but no strategy.

That will become clear when the long-delayed inquiry hears evidence from the key players. The process may take years, extending even beyond the general election due no later than 2024. It could be the nation’s first “pandemic poll”, passing judgment on a Tory government that let the people down.

SNOOTYGATE

Skipton was voted second happiest place in Britain to live in a recent poll. St Ives in Cornwall came top, for its access to the sea.

You don’t get much further from the sea than “the gateway to the Dales” but you do have the Leeds and Liverpool canal, and the river Aire regularly floods.

Harrogate came ninth. But with apologies to UNISON members who live there, I wouldn’t live in that snooty town for all the tea in Tetley’s warehouse.

The average house price is £336,968 and the average rent

for a two-bed property is an eye-watering £821 a month. How UNISON members manage, I don’t know.

But I do know the population there need public services just as much as the poor of Leeds.

TONY AWARDS?

Forget the fuss about the authenticity of The Crown. Writers of the new rock opera Tony! admit to playing “fast and loose with the facts” about Tony Blair’s life.

Well, he started it, with his dodgy dossier about Saddam Hussein’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

DERAILED

It’s Yorkshire’s Eighth Wonder of the World, and they come from miles around to marvel at it.

The 144-year-old Ribbleshead Viaduct, which takes the iconic Settle-Carlisle line four hundred and forty yards across the Ribbles Valley, is getting an upgrade.

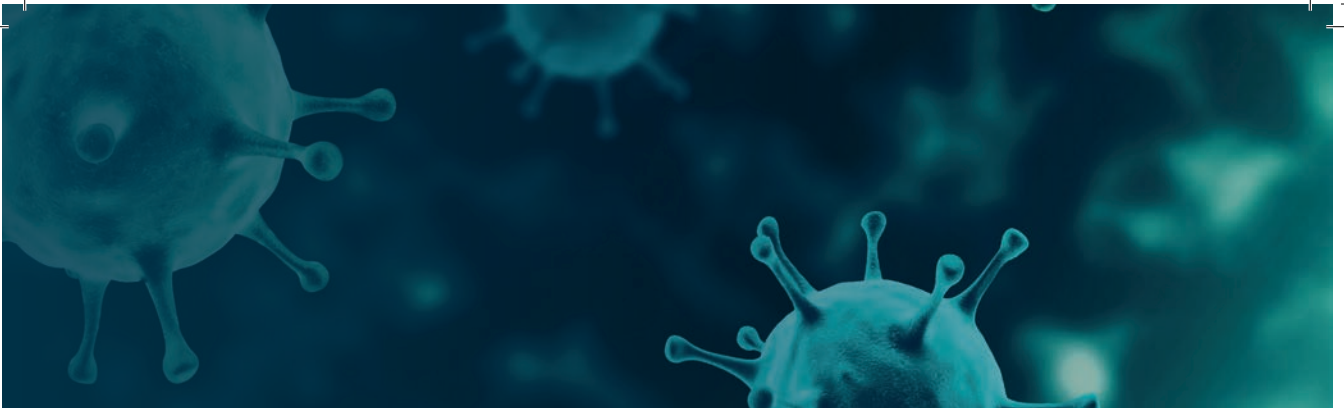
Laser scanners and drones have scrutinised every inch of the Grade II-listed structure to enable £2.2 million-worth of restoration work to go ahead.

Wonderful news for railway buffs like me, but the latest news about HS2 has upset local politicians.

It looks certain that the high-speed link from Birmingham to



OUR
PUBLIC
SERVICE
WORKERS
CERTAINLY
DIDN'T
FAIL US.



Leeds will be scrapped. Arrival had already been put back to 2035-40 and the whole project is now in doubt.

Meanwhile, householders along the proposed route through South Yorkshire whose homes are blighted by planning chaos are plunged into fresh uncertainty.

Council leaders say HS2 is vital to the Tories' much-vaunted "levelling-up the North" strategy. They should stop worrying and face reality : it ain't going to happen.

Not in our lifetime, at least. And then who will want to get to Brum in half an hour? Or London in ninety minutes. They're both close enough for me.

I DO... OR DO I?

Boris Johnson is looking forward to a "different world" in the summer with lots of weddings.

Er, does that mean he's going to marry fiancée Carrie Symonds, mother of his sixth (admitted) child?

He ducked the question from reporters, burling "take that one offline, as they say".

What does that mean, Mr Cryptic Casanova? Apparently it's business jargon for let's talk about this some other time, preferably when you're not here.

In plain English, "shut up." He gets more like his hero Margaret Thatcher every day.

GO ON CHRIS LAD!

A star is born : "waffling Chris." You've seen him, reading the BBC News or heard him presenting Any Questions on the radio.

Besppectacled Chris Mason, he of the wrinkled forehead and the raised eyebrows – the most uplifted since Denis Healey's famous

bushy supercilia (to use the correct medical term) - is the Beeb's political correspondent.

He's taken the broadcasting world by storm, even impressing Conservative women who called him "mildly irreverent, self-deprecating and congenial, as well as being highly competent".

They probably want to adopt Chris, 40, who was born in Airedale Hospital, Steeton and raised in Grassington in the heart of the Dales.

The BBC is more open to regional accents these days, and Chris thinks his Yorkshire vowels probably helped him to succeed toffee-nosed Jonathan Dimbleby in the Any Questions? chair.

He's a breath of fresh air in the stuffy world of Westminster broadcasting journalism. Up the eyebrows!

RICH GET RICHER

The Tory Party isn't just the party of business. It is a business.

When the pandemic began, local Conservative associations round the country applied for taxpayer-funded £10,000 Covid grants.

Wakefield party took the money to pay business rates on their headquarters in Zetland Street, claiming they were entitled to the money "just like any other organisation".

Well, maybe so, except that unlike other organisation the filthy-rich Tories are bankrolled by some of the wealthiest money-men in the country.

That doesn't stop them from battenning on to the hard-pressed council taxpayers of Wakefield, the city they stole from Labour in the general election.

DRIZZLE CAKE

Milord Mandelson, when he was

just politician Pete, predicted that Britain would enjoy a "continental cafe culture" when New Labour introduced 24-hour drinking in 2005.

It never happened. We don't have continental weather.

Now, Kirklees council promises a "garden street" in Huddersfield centre, with green space to encourage cafe-culture outdoor dining.

The town gets 33 inches of rain a year, and the average temperature is 9.6 C, or 49.4 F in old money. Bring a brolly and hot water bottle.

TIME LADIES ...

Planning permission is sought to convert the Clock Tower, a well-known former girls' school in Scarborough, into a drinking establishment.

St Trinians would be an apt name.

... AND FINALLY

I would like to pay a personal tribute to the staff at my local hospital in Keighley who keep this wordsmith on the road.

Airedale General has borne the brunt of a second wave of Covid-19 in the area, with more than a hundred deaths since the autumn, bringing the total to 229 – a heavier toll than the first wave.

Since the pandemic struck, more than 307,000 people have tested positive for coronavirus in Yorkshire. More than 10,000 have died, with Leeds, Sheffield and Bradford each recording more than 1,000 deaths.

Hardest hit hospitals are : Bradford Teaching, 523 deaths; Calderdale, 425; Hull University Teaching, 673 ; Leeds Teaching, 765; Mid-Yorkshire, 862; Sheffield Teaching, 772; Rotherham, 511 and York 493.

Despite the risks, NHS never failed us. □

The views expressed in this column are not necessarily those of UNISON

A HIDDEN MENACE

A call for mandatory asbestos training for healthcare staff should be widened to include all public sector workers, says **Marion Voss** a senior lawyer and asbestos specialist at Thompsons Solicitors

Controlling asbestos in workplaces has been a priority for decades – going back as far as 1972 when we brought the first-ever successful case for asbestos disease to the House of Lords.

However, there is still much more work to be done. Workplaces are failing to implement and enforce regulations that can control asbestos.

Those in charge of public buildings need to ensure that asbestos is properly managed, and workers need to be able to recognise the material and understand the risks associated with it.

A recent report recommending mandatory training in asbestos awareness for the UK healthcare workforce is a step in the right direction.

The report, entitled 'MAGS – The Healthcare Staff Mesothelioma Asbestos Guidance Study', is a 74-page document prepared by the University of Sheffield and funded by Mesothelioma UK.

It sets out a series of recommendations, including adding awareness of asbestos

risk to the mandatory training for new members of NHS staff. It also suggests that staff leaving the service should be reminded that asbestos still exists in most NHS premises and that asbestos-related illnesses, such as mesothelioma, an aggressive and deadly form of cancer, are a possibility even when someone is no longer exposed to it.

As much as Thompsons welcomes the MAGS report and its call for adding asbestos awareness to induction training of healthcare workers, we believe such recommendations should not be limited to those working in healthcare. The training could have a real impact across all public sectors if it became available to them – and it should.

In schools, for example, this training would be hugely beneficial. Worryingly, it is believed that 85 per cent of school buildings in England contain asbestos, particularly schools that were built between 1945 and 1975. This means that, potentially, thousands of staff and pupils are at risk of being exposed to the material, or have been, and therefore have a higher chance of developing an

asbestos-related disease.

There are concerns that nearly 700 schools are failing to safely manage asbestos in their buildings and, as a result, have recently been referred to the national health and safety body, highlighting how important understanding and recognising asbestos is.

The truth is that asbestos is still present in workplaces across the UK and remains very much a part of our lives. Although it was banned more than 21 years ago, it will continue to devastate our future with many people still developing asbestos-related diseases.

We must train more people on the risks of asbestos to ensure future exposure to this dangerous substance can be avoided, and ultimately to minimise the number of people dying in the long-term.

The funding for the training should come from central government, not the employer. We fear that otherwise it will be added to a long 'to do' list and since local authorities and health authorities are cash-strapped it simply won't happen. □



IT IS BELIEVED THAT 85 PER CENT OF SCHOOL BUILDINGS IN ENGLAND CONTAIN ASBESTOS

Marion Voss

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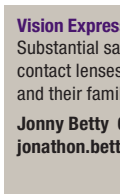
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