

UNISON

South Western Ambulance Branch Update

THE GRAPEVINE

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Your life and your work

Forget the old concept of grapevines. This particular Grapevine aims to break with tradition, bringing you the facts, not the gossip.

Traditionally, "The Grapevine" implies a word-of-mouth form of communication, in which rumour and hearsay spreads and mutates.

Well, not this Grapevine. This Grapevine brings you the news, facts and information about your South Western Ambulance UNISON branch that you need to know about. We are fortunate now to have a regular Bulletin, which keeps us updated at work. And now this publication aims to keep you updated from a slightly different angle— that of your life and your work, and to keep you informed of the efforts that your Union is making to ensure that one isn't unfairly impacted on by the other. It is important that you are kept informed of this, because a lot of work is being done on your behalf, and your voice is important, so we feed back to you what is going on in the hope that you feel involved and inspired.

Welcome to Issue 2 of The Grapevine. I hope you find it worthwhile, and as always I look forward to hearing from you with any articles or suggestions.

- R Fox, Editor

Getting around the stations

a note from Ian Hopkins, Branch Secretary

Having had to take years introducing 'Agenda for Change' and then another few months with the introduction of the new Trust, the branch's senior representatives are, at last, returning to a more normal work-load. The most important aspect of that work is getting out to the stations to talk to our members.

The normal way for this to happen is for branch representatives to travel around an area visiting several stations in a day. This ensures our members have as many opportunities as possible to meet us in person at a time and a place that suits them - **and this works!**

Naturally we will give members as much notice as possible but we will also take opportunities to 'drop in' where we can. Recent visits include stations in Dorset, and Trust HQ in Exeter where the change process has affected members most deeply.



Ian Hopkins

If you would like us to come to your station over the coming weeks let us know and we will do our best to be there.

- Ian Hopkins

NHS Logistics strike action

The biggest health service strike for almost 20 years began on 21st September, and saw solid support from across the trade union movement.

The much-publicised NHS Logistics strike saw staff leave their work at 10pm on 21st and 26th September at all five depots across England.

NHS Logistics is the not-for-profit organisation that delivers medical equipment and food throughout the NHS in England. Although no business case has been provided, the government has sold NHS Logistics to parcel delivery company DHL.

UNISON general secretary Dave Prentis has written to health minister Andy Burnham, seeking assurances that staff will not be adversely affected by the planned transfer. UNISON is calling for a suspension of the contract that transfers NHS Logistics staff to DHL.

"What we're very clearly trying to say to the government is let's go back to partnership, let's go back to talking, let's get a consensus around what the NHS should be like," said UNISON head of health Karen Jennings.

"The rest of the staff in the NHS will be watching what's happening to NHS Logistics," she added.

News in brief

Date set for branch executive meeting

The next South Western Ambulance Branch Executive meeting is planned for Monday 9th October. Details of the agenda will be put on our website once finalised.

Do you have issues you would like to see raised at a trust wide level? If so please talk to your Branch Executive member.

Thousands march against NHS cuts

SOME 2,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Nottingham at the weekend of 23rd September to protest at health service cuts.

The demo, jointly organised by UNISON and the Royal College of Nursing, saw thousands join the march.

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www.swamb.com

National Ambulance Strategic Partnership Forum

A new national partnership forum has been established following approaches by UNISON to the Department of Health and the new Ambulance Trusts.

UNISON recognised that with the recent mergers, this was a vital time for us to ensure that the benefits associated with the new terms and conditions are applied fairly and equitably across the ambulance sector.

It must be made clear that the new forum will not replace the existing NHS Staff Council arrangements for the negotiation of national pay and conditions. Yet it will provide a means to communicate and share a common understanding of the challenges facing ambulance services nationally.

The forum will have another immense benefit to ambulance staff as it will ensure 'appropriate influence by ambulance services and staff on the perceptions and activities of the NHS Staff Council'. This is an exciting development – a UNISON idea which will be central to staff in all Trusts, ensuring that we move closer to a national standard for ambulance services. The real key is the partnership and its ability to develop common practises across the sector. Not just Penzance to Poole, but Penzance to Peebles.



The return of the 12 hour shift

Our members are understandably concerned about the possibility of changes to shift patterns and meal break arrangements. Changes will be happening throughout the trust – but we will work to ensure that such change will happen only after you have been consulted.

Within Dorset, where 12 hour shifts are in place, there continues to be debate about how best to reduce to 37.5 hours, maintain emergency cover as much as possible, whilst staying within the expectations of the 'Agenda for Change' Terms and Conditions. These debates were started well before the formation of the new trust.

Within Cornwall, Devon and Somerset the debate centres on how to re-introduce 12 hour shifts. However, having talked to many staff over the past few weeks there are pockets of staff who would like to retain the 10 hour shifts. In both the 12 hour cases, meal breaks are the problem issue (again!).

Derriford station is the first station to be asked to look at rotas in detail. They have been given the guidelines that they will need to work within, and have been asked to develop new rotas from there. UNISON members - with the necessary support from the branch, will be trying to develop new patterns over the coming weeks. However, as with all these things it will be up to the members to decide what they want UNISON to agree on their behalf - there are no done deals!

Derriford will be crucial to the process of introducing new shift patterns, so we will be asking them to take their time and get it right. What happens there may inevitably influence the rest of the trust. As they develop their work we will ask them to share their news with the rest of us through *'The Grapevine'*.

The meal break issue reaches crunch point

Most people knew it from the very early days of the introduction of the Agenda for Change — when it comes a meal breaks and the Ambulance Services, there is going to be a problem...

During a long and complicated process over several years, UNISON fought hard to try and ensure that the 'Agenda for Change' brought improvements and uniformity to pay and conditions for its members across the NHS. One of these improvements was to guarantee staff a meal break during their working shift, by making sure it is outside the paid working day. Standard working hours were set to 37.5 hours a week, not including time spent on a meal break.

This is quite workable in most areas of the Health Service, but instantly created difficulties for ambulance trusts, which have to maintain emergency cover at all times and yet are obliged to try and ensure staff take a break. Further complication is caused by ambulance staff who want to work 12 hour shift patterns, creating the need for 2 breaks during a shift. This has led to a difficult situation nationally across all ambulance trusts, and work is underway with UNISON to secure a national solution. Meanwhile, individual trusts are left to make their own arrangements.

UNISON members in the former Westcountry areas of the trust are trialling the re-introduction of 12 hour shifts with 2 unpaid mealbreaks. Yet over in the Dorset area, where 12 hour rotas are already in place, the meal break problems are different. Here, from the beginning of this month, staff working 12 hours are stepped down to a 37.5 hour week, exclusive of meal breaks. This does not mean that they will see any actual drop in pay, but it does mean that they will have to continue to attend work for a 39 hour week, and only one meal break from each shift will

be taken outside of the working day.

This raises concern over emergency cover, and so there are suggestions for a payment in the event of meal break interruption if staff agree to be available for life threatening calls during their unpaid break. Similar arrangements are already in place in some other ambulance trusts.

A vote was promised and UNISON representatives met with both members and then management earlier this year, putting forward a set of suggested requirements and conditions surrounding the meal break issue.

Many members in Dorset were concerned about an email-ballot at the end of September, asking for a yes vote. Necessary small print seemed to be missing, raising many vital questions, and the break which attracted the interruption payment was set as the one during the busiest part of the shift, not allowing any financial incentive for management to ensure that staff received their break during the busiest time.

Urgent meetings were arranged on Tuesday 26th September and Friday 29th September between senior UNISON officials and senior management to try and negotiate a solution - the result is that the staff in Dorset will now be asked to vote on two options the details of which will be communicated to Dorset staff **with the necessary detail** for members to be able to make an informed decision. The UNISON negotiators are convinced that the management have made their final case and that the options staff will consider are the best on offer. **Please contact your UNISON representative if you require any clarification of your rights.**

Whatever the outcome of the ballot, the new Dorset system will be an interim arrangement until a national and trust-wide position is agreed. Then all staff in the South Western Ambulance Trust will have common procedures. *The Grapevine* will keep you informed of developments.

Moving to the future — NHS pension review

What will you do when you retire? What will you be able to afford to do when you retire? More to the point, *when will you retire?* Discussions have been proceeding between the trade unions and the NHS employers over the past three years. The resulting document, "Moving To The Future: The NHS Pension Scheme Review", contains the final details of these negotiations.

UNISON has taken part in a major campaign to protect and improve pensions for Ambulance staff and other NHS workers. The agreement reached with the government has enabled many improvements which UNISON has strived for. Assurances include protection of the retirement age for staff currently employed within the NHS.

The major points outlined in the agreement are:

- Pensionable age will remain at 60 for current NHS employed staff
- The final salary scheme for all NHS staff will remain in place
- A new scheme will be introduced in 2008 with retirement at 65 but with retention of the final salary scheme.
- Present participants will continue to have 1/80 accrual, the option of taking a lump sum of up to 25% of the value of the pension.
- Survivors pensions extended to all couples in long term relationships, extending back to 1988
- The new scheme will have an accrual rate of 1/60 with more flexibility during final years of service

There will be a small increase in contributions for most members, with a reduction for some. Those up to pay point 9 (15,107) will pay just 5% whilst those above this point will pay 6.5%, representing half a percentage increase for most. UNISON believes that this is a price worth paying for the achievements contained within these proposals.

A ballot will take place at the end of October. UNISON recommends a yes vote. Full details can be found online at the UNISON health group website at: www.unison.org.uk/healthcare

What do you get as a member of UNISON?

You get local representation right here within the South Western Ambulance Service, along with the security and power of Britain's biggest Trade Union, with 1.3 million members.

Anyone can face problems at work sometimes. As a member of UNISON, you don't have to face them alone. UNISON provide advice and representation on issues such as pay, rotas, leave and sickness. The union is also there to help ensure your workplace is safe and healthy, and to support you in the event of disciplinary, dismissal or redundancy.

UNISON campaigns on key issues affecting both our members and the public at large. UNISON are working to improve public services, win equal pay and employment rights, improve safety in the workplace and end harassment and discrimination at work.

In addition to all this, you get the backup of legal support, and you get a wide range of benefits and deals on things like holidays and insurance. But the benefits of a union relies on the strength and motivation of its membership. **To join us, visit www.swamb.com or speak to your local representative.**

Your help is needed

I am on the lookout for articles and news. I know there is a lot going on out there, and I take pride in being able to share the latest union news, views and events with all UNISON members through this publication.

But I need your help. Please email me with anything you think is relevant. It doesn't need to be word-perfect (I reserve the right to edit anything submitted). Also, any comments, criticism or suggestions are welcome. Please email me at:

russfox999@hotmail.co.uk

- Russell Fox, Editor

Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the editor. Nor do they necessarily reflect official UNISON policy or opinion.