

# Unison colludes in pay cuts at Scottish care charity Quarriers

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Opposition by care workers to drastic pay cuts by the Scottish charity Quarriers is in imminent danger of betrayal by the Unison trade union.

Quarriers runs care homes and support services for young people and adults with disabilities and special needs. Set up by William Quarrier in 1871, the organisation initially opened orphanages and a *tuberculosis* clinic, and established its own village near Glasgow, which it retains. While most of its services are in Scotland, it also operates in Wiltshire.

In April this year, Quarriers announced that its 2,000 staff were to be given 90 days notice of sweeping reductions to pay, sick, maternity and travel benefits.

Automatic pay increases to keep pace with inflation were to be replaced with “discretionary” rises, while workers’ pension contributions would be increased by 3 percent. In addition to this effective pay cut, changes to pay scales will mean that a number of workers could lose as much as 35 percent of their current salaries.

Overall 58 percent of staff faced pay cuts of more than 3 percent.

Quarriers stated the cuts were necessary following a “review of competitor organisations across the UK”.

Supporting vulnerable people with a host of specific problems and aspirations is complex. Great physical and emotional demands are made on staff. But the tendering regime operating in most areas of social service provision means a perpetual competition between rival charities, semi-privatised local authority agencies and private companies.

The staff pay for this, as those organisations that pay the lowest wages and offer services on a shoe-string are most likely to win contracts. In a period of savage local government cuts, this competitive pressure is only

intensifying.

In the Glasgow area, for example, Quarriers are in competition with similar organisations such as the charities Enable and the Richmond Fellowship, and Glasgow City Council’s social service wing, Cordia.

Unison, the largest public service union with a paper membership of 1.3 million workers nationally, has fully accommodated to this tendering regime. As in all areas of social provision, the central aim of the well-paid functionaries running Unison and other unions is to preserve good relations with management. Should this require drastic reductions in care workers’ living standards, then so be it.

It took fully four months before Unison even organised a strike ballot over Quarriers’ unilateral announcement. In the interim, there was not the slightest attempt to mobilise the union membership in Quarriers, or to alert workers throughout the care industry as to the precedent that was being set.

When the strike ballot was eventually organised, Unison Regional Organiser Simon MacFarlane submitted a briefing paper to the Quarriers board. This set out to remind Quarriers of the invaluable assistance Unison had provided the charity during previous cuts between 2008 and 2010.

According to MacFarlane, Unison successfully recommended deals to its members that in 2008 removed nightshift enhancement, and reduced pay scales.

In 2009, Unison encouraged its members to accept cuts to occupational pay, lose 25 percent of their nightshift allowance, cut holiday pay and car allowances, along with a freeze in pay and increments. In 2010, Unison recommended a less than inflation pay rise.

This time around, MacFarlane complained that the scale

and distribution of the huge cuts Quarriers intended were causing problems. The briefing highlighted cases of individual workers losing between £330 and £400 a month.

MacFarlane proposed instead an alternative distribution of cuts through a “sliding scale of salary reductions across the whole organisation” of between 2 and 11 percent. Quarriers’ chief executive Paul Moore told the press that one of Unison’s alternate proposals involved 200 redundancies.

In the event, despite Unison’s delay, workers voted 76 percent in favour of strike action, which was held on September 6. Some 450 workers attended a rally in Glasgow the same day, while numerous care homes and support schemes were picketed. Ten days later, workers lobbied the Scottish parliament.

For Unison, the strike was just a means of levering itself into negotiations with management. Having done so, the Unison officials immediately assured Quarriers that no further strike action was planned.

On September 27, Unison and Quarriers held further talks out of which emerged the proposal that pay cuts would be restricted to a maximum of “only” 17 percent.

All except the most poorly paid staff will lose 3 percent while large numbers of support workers, carers, coordinators, senior workers and specialists will lose up to 17 percent in return for one-off “compensation” payments. There will no annual pay increment, which, given inflation, is a further pay cut.

On September 30, Unison suspended a further two days of scheduled strikes. MacFarlane and Quarriers branch secretary Stephen Brown wrote to branch members, effectively advising them that the current offer “is the best that can be achieved by negotiation.” The union told workers to be aware that “management will then proceed to dismiss and re-engage” should members continue to oppose the cuts.

Unison made clear it had no intention of pursuing the matter any further. Legal avenues were “not guaranteed to succeed and will take a long time to conclude” while “any further industrial action would have to be on a far greater scale and even then it is unclear whether further action would achieve a better offer.”

In other words, MacFarlane and Brown are washing their hands of Quarriers workers and advising acceptance of the

new terms. A ballot is currently being held. Should individual workers continue opposition, then, Unison insists, they are on their own.

This poses Quarriers workers with an unavoidable challenge. No successful defence of jobs, wages and conditions is possible within the framework of Unison.

At the same time, the record of the rival unions such as Unite, the GMB, the PCS, etc, shows that these organisations are as hostile to working people as Unison.

Even using the term “union” to describe these organisations obscures more than it reveals. “Union” implies some collective defence of workers’ living standards. In contrast, the trade unions today are organisations fully committed to the defence of British capitalism. Especially in the context of government austerity measures, this means driving down the living standards and rights of the working class.

The pay cuts being organised by Unison at Quarriers are not unusual. It is now standard practise across every workplace.

New rank-and-file organisations of workers, completely independent of the trade unions, are required. These should mobilise across all sectors and communities in opposition to all cuts. They must be part of the fight to unite workers across Britain, and internationally, in a political struggle against a class system that works entirely in the interests of the super-rich, who have no need of care homes or social support.

Above all a new political party of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party, is required to lead the fight for a workers’ government that would reorganise society according to human need, not private profit.



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