NEWSLETTER



***West Midlands Ambulance Branch***

May 2023

Firstly, we wanted to write to thank you for your historic levels of engagement with UNISON in recent months. In unprecedented times in the Ambulance Services and the NHS more widely, you have participated in a huge national ballot, a re-ballot, and pay consultation on the offer, turning out in large numbers, multiple times.

Members in branches that took action did a great job in running effective strikes that got us lots of public support and more leverage than we probably expected from only 8 formal strike mandates.  However, being able to show that strikes would spread to WMAS was significant in getting the Government to talk to UNISON.

As you know, the Government had been talking one-to-one with the RCN for a while before the formal Staff Council negotiations started on 7 March.   What you might not know is that it was at the point when we announced the 9 new mandates, including yours, that they started to offer talks to UNISON, and it was at the insistence of the general secretary that we didn't simply have our own one-to-one conversations - we made sure we opened the door to all the other unions in dispute, so we had formal negotiations with the joint unions.  Having you poised and ready to deliver effective strike action in WMAS was critical in giving us the leverage to make this happen for all the unions.  We had 30,000 members able to take part in strike action, and you have delivered something that is on the table for over a million people.

The offer that your members have considered is a significant improvement to the £1400 + 3.5% that had been committed by Government, but it still falls short of what I know you deserve.  We know it was accepted because members need that lump sum cash and the security of a pay rise now, and not because they think this is a perfect outcome.

We know from what your branch has achieved over the past few months gave us the power we needed to bring this government to the table although the offer falls far short of what we expect for our hard-working members. Your re-ballot was crucial in getting UNISON into the room with the government and forcing an increased offer. We know the offer did not go far enough but it was the best offer from a hostile government that could be achieved through negotiation.

The dispute on pay had been ongoing since summer 2022, until when on 2 May 2023, the NHS Staff Council (including the 12 health trade unions) came to a majority decisions after consulting their respective members to accept the pay offer from the government.

The West Midlands Ambulance Service branch played a key role in the dispute. Some headlines regarding the branch’s impact and record:

* Highest turnout in the West Midlands Region in the October/November 2022 industrial action ballot
* Highest turnout in England in the January/February 2023 re-ballot
* Highest turnout in the pay offer consultation in the West Midlands Region

This level of membership engagement is excellent for the branch and for the democracy of the union.

UNISON nationally has voted to accept the pay offer, with 74% of members voting to accept and 26% voting to reject, on a turnout of 53%. As a democratic, member-led union, this outcome led to the position for UNISON to accept the pay offer.

**The results for WMAS branch were: 46% accept, 54% reject, on a turnout of 71%**

The offer was accepted by the vast majority of branches and an analysis of the results shows that Ambulance branches nationally voted to accept the pay offer and the branches with mandates for strike action also did vote to accept the offer.

The fight for the future of the NHS and improving your lives at work is not over. There are many campaigns to win, from local GRS issues to in-sourcing private Ambulance workers campaigns; and national campaigns such as reducing the retirement age for Ambulance workers, to changing the way pay rises are set in the NHS from the Pay Review Body process to a goal of achieving collective bargaining.

Thank you for being a member in the largest union the UK; the largest union in the NHS; the largest union in Ambulance services in the UK and by far the biggest union at WMAS. Your participation in the balloting period forced UNISON and other trade unions into the room, with a hostile government, and led to an increased pay packet for a million workers.

Your size and influence cannot be underestimated.

Thank you for your ongoing support.

**UNISON West Midlands Ambulance Branch**

# Health Conference Update

Branch delegates attended the recent health conference and listened to what you were asking and called on conference to robustly move forward and support the following motions: -

**Ambulance pressure and the impact on staff**

Ambulance waiting times outside of hospitals are now the longest they have ever been in recorded history. Conference recognised and applauded the work of UNISON members in ambulance trusts who have been performing under incredible pressures due to the pandemic, underfunding of the NHS and the lack of social care packages for patients.

The overcrowding also prevents NHS ambulance crews from bringing their patients into hospitals; instead, the crews remain outside with often critically ill patients being denied the health care they deserve. This has taken an enormous toll on the health and wellbeing of ambulance staff and has seen record numbers of ambulance staff leave the service.

Unison calls on the Health Service Group executive to: -

* Develop a campaign around mental health, stress and workload specifically focussed on ambulance staff.
* Conduct a survey of ambulance members to identify key issues and produce meaningful data to support a UNISON report on the impact.
* Run a media and social media campaign off the back of the report, flagging the issues our members are facing at work and campaign for changes.
* Seek to work with Labour Link to take a delegations of ambulance staff to Westminster to highlight to politicians about the issues they are facing and what is required to make improvements.
* Request that Labour Link continues to use all its influence to ensure Labour Part has a manifesto commitment to significantly increase funding for both the NHS and social care.

**Retirement Age parity with Emergency Services for Ambulance staff**

Unison acknowledges that lowering the retirement age for ambulance staff in line with other emergency workers is a high priority. the disparity in retirement age between police, fire service and ambulance staff is unfair.

Conference notes that increase demands, patients presenting with complex conditions and a global pandemic has left the ambulance service on its knees. Handover delays, exacerbated by a growing social care crisis have led to ambulance staff witnessing patients dying in the back of their vehicles, whilst being unable to tend to other seriously ill patients. Conference notes with alarm the mental health impacts this is having on staff, combined with low pay and worsening working conditions is causing ambulance workers to leave the NHS in their droves. Winter pressures are now year-round pressures and with decades of underfunding and a recruitment and retention crisis has heightened the pressures on our members.

Ambulance works perform one of the most valuable roles in our communities and increasingly this is a role that takes so much from them but give little back in terms of reward and recognition.

Unison calls on the Health Service Group Executive to

* Raise awareness amongst the public and media to support that ambulance worker are NOT considered ‘emergency workers’ when it comes to qualifying for early retirement, despite providing what most people deem an ‘emergency service.’
* Commission research to identify the physical and mental impact on specific groups working in the ambulance service, particularly during the later years of their working life.
* Promote the argument that lowering the retirement age will help to improve the recruitment and retention for ambulance staff.
* Seek, as minimum, commitments from politicians to review current retirement age for staff working in the ambulance service.
* Promote and seek improves to the existing Early Retirement Reduction Buy Out scheme, negotiated by UNISON to share costs 50:50 between employers and staff.
* Work through the NHS scheme advisory board to consider options to help ambulance members retire earlier than 67

**Pay review body – it’s time to go.**

Conference fully supports an all-unison approach to pay, namely an award that give all our members across all regions a pay increase that takes inflation into account. We are fully behind the Unison campaign for an inflation busting uplift around pay as well as dealing with the issue of pay restoration. The issue is the PRB is not listening to Unisons demands.

It is not the evidence of the unison submissions to the PRB that need to be changed but the PRB structure that needs to be scrapped. We supported the fact that it is now time to organise and set a path to restore full collective bargaining and be brave and radical in the approach of treading our own path.