

UNISON fights second NHS battle, over attack on Agenda for Change

As the battle against the government's Controversial health and social care bill dominates headlines, another war is being waged in the NHS – to protect the terms of conditions of Agenda for Change. And UNISON is winning significant victories in defence of the national agreement.

With budgets shrinking, NHS trusts have been exploring ways in which they can breach Agenda for Change and save money at employees' expense.

"UNISON has been supporting branches at local level, where they are being attacked on their terms and conditions," said the union's head of health Christina McAnea. One of the most significant victories this year has been in Manchester. In January, an employment tribunal backed UNISON's claim that health workers at a Manchester hospital should not be denied their incremental pay rise for taking time off sick.

Under Agenda for Change, health workers advance one point up their pay band each year until they reach the top of the band. But in October, the Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust imposed a new rule – barring progress not on the basis of knowledge and skills, but for hitting arbitrary sickness 'triggers'. The move not only threatened to hit pay hard – potentially leaving staff out of pocket by as much as £2,000 a year – but could also affect their pensions, if they retired before they reached the top of their grade.

UNISON raised a grievance with the trust, but when it refused to back down, the union lodged a tribunal case on behalf of more than 100 members who had been denied their incremental pay rise. And their success, in what is regarded as a test case, means that other hospital trusts will not be able to penalise health workers in a similar way. "This is a victory for fairness," said UNISON regional head of health Paul Foley. "We hope the trust now honours its obligations to pay incremental rises, and gets back to the day job of providing healthcare."

The Manchester case followed successful campaigns by UNISON against threats to Agenda for Change across the Midlands.

In Kettering, an NHS trust proposed that staff work half a day a month unpaid. In return, the trust would make a commitment not to outsource certain ancillary services. East Midlands regional organiser Gerry Looker called it "an empty guarantee" and while the trust wanted to ballot staff on the proposal, UNISON had other ideas.

"The proposal was an easy option by a poor employer whose standard of management in some areas, including HR, is not fit for purpose," he said. "UNISON members were advised to boycott the ballot, and our position was reinforced through local press and TV interviews.

"Our intervention put paid to the whole idea," he adds. "And you know what? In the end the trust was able to make savings elsewhere within its budget." Mr Looker warned that employers around his region were seeking talks to try and negotiate regional cuts to national terms and conditions. And Ms McAnea said that UNISON health branches everywhere need to be vigilant and report any proposals to their regional team or the UNISON centre.

The union has also recirculated the joint union bargaining advice first issued in February 2011.

And a resource pack for branches, which will assist in the event of threats to the Agenda for Change agreement, will be launched at health conference.



NHS staff face attacks on their terms and conditions – but UNISON is fighting back.

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