

T&G voluntary sector campaign

Strength in numbers

The T&G recently launched a campaign to improve the rights of voluntary sector workers who deliver public services. Jennie Formby explains why the campaign was launched and what they hope to achieve

The direction of government policy in public service reform simultaneously presents opportunities and challenges for voluntary sector managers, funders and workers. Ministers have made it clear that they see public sector reform as the dominant policy area for the Labour government's third term in office, and that the third sector is absolutely central to the delivery of core public services.

For the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G), as a trade union with members in both the public, private and voluntary sector, this shift presents us with a range of issues to address. Terms and conditions of our members in any sector is paramount, as we are determined that the voluntary and private sector should not be seen as a way of delivering public services more cheaply by paying workers less money and treating them less favourably. If that is allowed to happen it would be detrimental not just to workers in both sectors, but to the delivery of services. It would certainly go against the grain of negotiations the trade unions have been having over the past few years with government aimed at ending the two-tier workforce, created as a result of previous Conservative government's drive to contract out services and leave both workers and the public worse off.

We know from talking to many employers in the voluntary sector that they are well aware of the inadequate terms and conditions they offer and would dearly love to be in a position to be a better employer. Yet the way the sector is funded often makes their task impossible and puts an extraordinary strain on workers and managers alike. Not only is the sector significantly under-funded, but

the lack of clarity and myriad funding streams mean all too often, vast amounts of time – and money – being spent within the various organisations on applying and re-applying for funding, or in attempting to untangle the rules relating to each funding stream.

Take for example applying for funds. Increasing numbers of organisations have to employ people just to apply to statutory bodies, when that money could be going directly to service users. The National Housing Federation complained recently that Housing organisations are forced to spend £2 million a year on funding applications. Surely it would not be impossible for the government to simplify funding regimes thereby freeing up funds to go to service users and to pay workers in the sector a decent wage.

Few voluntary sector organisations are without recruitment and retention related problems, often due to the nature of contracts and the lack of funding. The costs, both in staff time and in placing adverts and paying agencies, are enormous. A strategy that helped to tackle problems of recruitment and retention in the sector would be welcomed by unions and employers alike.

Ministers also need to realise that reform of the sector is necessary not just from the point of view of financial sense, but because the delivery of good public services is suffering as a result of its fragility. The uncertainty and lack of continuity between contracts and funders mean that vulnerable people are at risk while funding bodies make short-term decisions about short-term contracts.

The T&G has launched a campaign to tackle some of these big issues about the long-term funding and management of the voluntary sector and is working with other

unions in the sector to further these aims. Together we want to positively influence public funding policy in order to enhance job quality and security within the sector, to end poverty and inequality within all workplaces and to enhance the communities in which we work.

The campaign is at its early stages and we want to actively engage voluntary sector employers and workers as we gather evidence. This we will jointly present to government to begin making the case for funding of the sector to be fundamentally reformed. Simultaneously we will be raising these issues at every level, from local authorities to MPs, to influence key decision makers on the need to reform the funding and management of the sector.

Voluntary sector employers should expect the T&G and other unions to continue their organising and recruiting success in the sector, campaigning vigorously for the improvement of terms and conditions. The T&G has 25,000 members and is experiencing rapid growth within the sector. While we want to positively engage good employers in working towards a better sector, we will not cease our efforts to bargain and campaign in individual organisations for better pay and conditions.

Jennie Formby is the National Secretary for ACTS, Transport and General Workers' Union

The T&G has produced a campaign pack including the T&G's Charter for the voluntary sector and guidance on key workplace issues in the sector. It is available from the T&G by emailing acts@tgwu.org.uk