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Dear Colleagues,

UNISON Health Service Group Executive – nomination request

UNISON members will soon have the opportunity to elect their representatives on the Health Service Group Executive (SGE), the leading national committee of lay activists in the health service group. I am writing to ask your UNISON branch to consider nominating me for the General Seat representing the East Midlands.

I am currently chair of Leicestershire Health UNISON branch, and a UNISON steward on the coronary care unit at Leicester's Royal Infirmary, where I work part-time as an audit co-ordinator. I have been a UNISON activist for over a dozen years.

I have held this seat on the SGE for the last year, since winning it in a by-election. During that time I have:

- ✓ Attended every Health SGE meeting, including health conference
- ✓ Written extensive reports of every SGE meeting, and distributed these by email to every UNISON health branch in the East Midlands.
- ✓ Attended regional health committee meetings to report back on the SGE's national activities.
- ✓ Argued successfully for the SGE to abide by conference policy and conduct a ballot of all members on the revised proposals for unsocial hours payments.
- ✓ Argued unsuccessfully for the SGE to recommend that UNISON members reject the 2007 NHS pay offer in the ballot we held in September.
- ✓ Pushed for the union to organise a national demonstration in defence of the NHS, which was eventually held on November 3rd, 2007.
- ✓ Co-written a review of the ill health retirement proposals currently out for consultation, and a draft response for my own UNISON branch.

Within my branch I have:

- ✓ Supported stewards and members in private contractors to make significant progress towards the Framework Agreement and equal pay with their NHS colleagues, in the process recruiting 35 new members amongst Medirest workers at the Glenfield Hospital, and five new UNISON stewards.
- ✓ Organised a fight against bed closures and cutbacks in Leicester's three acute hospitals.

- ✓ Assisted many members win improved Agenda for Change outcomes, both through the review process and through submitting grievances where there were failures in the evaluation process.

Over the year that I have served on the SGE I believe I have spoken up for UNISON members in our region, and argued for the union to be more forceful, more direct and more effective in defending members – whether that happens at a local, regional or national level. My year on the SGE has convinced me more than ever that we need national leaders in our union who are prepared to disagree, to speak out and to challenge the ‘accepted’ way of doing things. Especially when the accepted way of doing things is not working.

We have massive challenges in front of us in the health service. Whoever is elected on to the SGE this spring will lead the union through the next two years. Just for starters they will have to deal with:

NHS pay

How will we deal with the government’s stated aim of keeping public sector pay rises below the rate of inflation? The TUC’s campaign to speak up for public sector workers is a start, but we have to confront the issue of the Pay Review Body. I believe we must not make ourselves victims of the PRB. If the PRB recommendation is below an acceptable level we must fight for the government to pay us more. Currently the TUC (and UNISON) say that we should respect the ‘integrity’ and ‘independence’ of the Pay Review Body, and not question their recommendations. I say that the integrity and independence of our union should come first. The Government have already shown that they are prepared to vary a PRB award downwards – we must be prepared to fight them to vary it upwards.

Reconfiguration (again) and marketisation in PCTs

There is a real danger that staff working in Primary Care Trusts will see the next round of reconfigurations as just another attempt by management to re-arrange the deckchairs on the Titanic. But the threat contained within the Government’s agenda is much more dangerous than that. Within the next two years we will see many PCTs either choosing, or being pushed, to effectively privatise the ‘provider’ elements of their organisations, and then commissioning services from private sector competitors. This will have an appalling impact on patients, who will find that they will only get services provided which are profitable, but it will also put many thousands of NHS staff at risk of redundancy, losing their pension rights or worse. UNISON must lead a fight to stop the marketisation of the NHS. Producing detailed policy proposals is only part of the job, and we have to prepare our members to take decisive action in defence of the NHS before it is too late.

We need a strategy! UNISON at a national level faces a massive problem. The Government we elected, and whose party we (or some of us) are a constituent part of, is systematically undermining our pay, terms and conditions, and at the same time opening up the NHS – the greatest single achievement of a democratic society – to competition from private businesses, in such a way that the businesses are assured of profits, often at the expense of the workforce. A bigger threat to UNISON members is hard to imagine.

In the face of such a threat, the union should be on a state of alert – everything focussed on halting the slide into competition and profit-seeking at the expense of the sick and the vulnerable. The opportunity exists to build the biggest possible campaign in defence of the principles of the National Health Service, and by extension the pay and conditions of those who work in it. Yet we are consistently slow, hesitant and apparently half-hearted about doing so. Our UNISON-sponsored MPs are quiet in parliament, our members in the dark about what is needed. National figures from UNISON complain about the pace of change

and the lack of consultation, but pull back from outright confrontation over the agenda being followed by the Government. It is as if we are scared of them. Or we have no confidence that our members would respond positively to a call to defend the NHS with all our might.

Experience shows that with the right leadership our members would respond. And that with the right strategy we could confront the Government, and force a change of policy on the NHS. To develop such a strategy needs a willingness to trust local activists, to learn from successful and effective campaigns, and to spend less time in polite meetings with ministers and more time out on the streets amongst the millions of ordinary people who rely on the NHS and need it to be there for them when they are unwell.

I hope that in the last twelve months I have used the seat on the SGE to speak up for this kind of approach. I have tried to argue for more democracy and more openness in the union's decision making processes, and more accountability of the leadership to the grassroots members of the union, as I believe that members want a union which is more dynamic, more responsive and more assertive. I have sought to work with other members of the SGE to achieve these things. It's frustrating and disappointing that, so far, only a minority of my SGE colleagues agree that this is what is needed, but I do believe that even on the SGE some things are changing. I am very keen to continue pushing for such changes, and I would be very grateful if your branch would nominate me for a further term on the SGE so that I can do so.

The nomination period for the UNISON Health SGE election opens today, on January 7th and closes on February 15th. To make a valid nomination, your branch or branch committee must meet between these dates and agree the nomination, and your branch secretary and chair must then sign and submit the nomination form. Every branch in the East Midlands is entitled to submit nominations for the General Seat, the Female Seat and the Reserved Seat (for women earning below £7.25 only) and I hope your branch agrees to do so. This is your opportunity to influence the leadership our union will have for the next two years. Branches which do not make a nomination will have to choose their leaders from other people's choices!

Full details of the SGE election procedure, together with the forms, are on the UNISON website here:

http://www.unison.org.uk/elections/pages_view.asp?did=6256

I would be delighted to come to your branch, to hear from members directly about the issues which are important to them in this election. Please get in touch if you would like to invite me to a meeting. Or if you have any questions about the SGE election, or the work of the Service Group Executive itself, I will be happy to help if I can.

In solidarity,

Nick

Nick Holden

UNISON member 3494222