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Camden docks pay in dispute crackdown

WORKERS from Camden's Homeless Persons Unit are to have their wages docked after they staged a day's industrial action in the town hall last Friday.

They are the first employees to feel the full weight of a promised council crackdown on disputes, as Camden starts to fight its way out of its cash crisis and find savings of up to £60 million.

And this week council leader Councillor Tony Dykes said: "Camden has tried to be as patient and long-suffering as possible. Now we have to make it clear that this is a new ball game. It's not a threat — it's an indication that industrial action demanding additional resources cannot be entertained."

About 40 unit workers stand to lose one day's pay — a total of between £1,500 and £2,000, said an HPU spokeswoman — for ignoring a request from the Housing Department to end their occupation of the town hall.

They were protesting against the imminent end of a temporary worker's contract, whose role as receptionist they claimed was vital to the efficient running of the HPU. Since April the unit has run a telephone service only, in an attempt to tackle a backlog of 1,600 cases.

"We were told our wages would be docked because we weren't providing the service we were paid for," said the HPU's Denise Pittaway.

"But in fact the reason we went to the town hall was to improve the service, and to start seeing homeless people again. The only reason we couldn't do our job on that day was because homeless people were refused entry to the town hall, and all phone calls were redirected to the Housing Department."

But Mr Dykes said if HPU workers were not in their office, they could not do their jobs. "If they didn't carry out a significant part of their work on that day they can't expect to claim full pay. The legitimate right of trade union members to take industrial action still remains.

"But it's equally legitimate for the council, if there is no basis for agreement, to take the options open to it.

"It has to be understood the council has no secret resources stashed away in a safe. If industrial action is pursued that demands additional resources, it could mean other workers' livelihoods are jeopardised."

President of NALGO Angela Mason said union members would not be suspending union action to "co-operate" with Camden. "But we are not unwilling to settle disputes where we can."

Meanwhile Camden Council's second main union NUPE has pledged "conditional co-operation" with the hard-line approach, said branch secretary John Suddaby.

He said three current disputes involving NUPE members would be suspended.



Briefing probe sought

LABOUR councillor Ken Hulme has demanded an investigation into a "Briefing Freemasonry" he claims is operating in Camden Council.

This follows the launch of a probe by Frank Nickson, the Chief Executive, into allegations that staff at the Lesbian and Gay Unit used town hall facilities to send out publicity material for the hard-left faction Labour Briefing in a council mailing.

Mr Hulme said the situation in Camden had reached the stage where there had to be a thorough investigation into the influence of the group throughout the council, and that the probe had to be non-political.

"The Chief Executive has to be given the powers to follow through some of the complaints that have been made.

"There are as many grounds for concern over the Briefing Freemasonry within Camden as there was over Freemasonry in Hackney. They exist outside the rules of the Labour Party, outside the accepted conventions of local government and really as a law unto themselves."

Camden leader Councillor Tony Dykes dismissed his colleague's claims as "sensational talk made for headlines rather than realities", but admitted he had asked Mr Nickson to investigate the allegations made against members of the unit.

"If such things have been going on it would be an abuse and misuse of council facilities."

Councillor Sandra Plummer, the recently-deposed chairwoman of the Gay and Lesbian Committee and a Briefing member, said Mr Hulme's demands were an attempt to smear the group.

"It smacks of McCarthyism and I cannot believe they have been made by another member of the Labour Party. He is secretary of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee — does that mean that if there are members of that within the council there is corruption?"

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