

One in the eye for Sodexho

In the last issue of **SOLIDARITY** we published an interview with **Carolyn Leckie** on the lessons of the Glasgow Medical Secretaries strike. Now the members of the same North Glasgow Hospitals UNISON branch, have had another success. We publish a report on the strike and an interview by **Greg Dropkin** of **Labournet** with Carolyn.

Over 300 ancillary workers employed by French multinational Sodexho at Glasgow Royal Infirmary, organised escalating strike action, over poverty wages. Their claim was for restoration of full NHS Whitley equivalent Terms and Conditions, £5 hour minimum wage, 5% or £1000, 35 hour week; abolishing the 2 tier workforce. Staff were earning £4.20- £4.67 hour, with minimal sick pay, no shift allowances, time and a quarter only for overtime.

Sodexho Alliance is "the world's leading provider of food and management services" with more than 314,000 employees in 24,300 sites in 72 countries, with sales of 11.9 billion Euros for the year ending August 31st 2001. Sodexho's web site would be a real comfort for its employees, if only they could afford a computer on their miserable wages. Sodexho describes its 'mission' as striving "to create and offer services that contribute to a more pleasant way of life for people". Whenever and wherever they come together, their goal is "Improving the quality of daily life"! One of their slogans is: "Caring about quality of life for your co-workers helps them to succeed".

"True dignity lies in being of service to others", says founder Pierre Bellon. "The group's progress comes directly for the collective and personal progress of all its people." Staff will be glad to hear that "The winning team is the one whose members respect and appreciate each other!"

In Britain Sodexho has contracts in private prisons, detention centres as well as hospitals and other public services across the world. It won the contract for vouchers for asylum seekers.

Whilst it 'appreciates' its staff Sodexho was concerned to break the strike for fear of the contagion spreading. It flew and bussed 400 people from Liverpool and Ipswich as well as other areas in England, in a determined move to break the strike. Teenagers working on catering contracts at army barracks in Aldershot and near York were instructed to scab in Glasgow or be sacked. They were put up in Hotels and

some paid £10 hour, well over double the pay of our members. Sodexho paid £42.50 an night to the Travel Inn in George Street for the strike-breakers to stay. Some of the young people they brought in did not know they were being brought in to scab.

After escalating action, and a political campaign to build support, managers caved in just as strikers were set to launch a new round of strikes, mass pickets, rallies and a boycott of the firm. Strikers leafleted Celtic football club fans asking them to boycott the Celtic catering service which is run by Sodexho.

Greg Dropkin of **Labournet** interviewed branch secretary **Carolyn Leckie**.

What exactly did you win?

£5 an hour minimum, backdated to 1 April 2002. Trained staff like those with Food Hygiene Certificates will get £5.10, and £5.96 for Supervisors. Time and a half for overtime, a 20% shift allowance for nights and weekends - previously we've had nothing at all; ten public holidays. The sick pay is even more important. 3 months full pay followed by 3 months half pay, plus a guaranteed return to full Whitley NHS terms and conditions by 1 April 2004.

It took 4 hours to pin all this down, and it came on their 4th offer. Jim Devine (UNISON Scotland Regional official) thought their first one should be accepted. I said "I don't think so." We held out to represent the mandate of our members until we got our bottom line.

We will also be seeking some of the Whitley Terms and Conditions before April 2004, like a full overtime rate for Sundays and improving the sickness rate to 6 months full plus 6 months half pay. Maternity leave will have to improve.

Various standards, policy and procedures are up for negotiation before the guaranteed return to NHS terms and conditions kicks in.

How did Sodexho take it?

You could tell they were crestfallen. Their Scottish Managing Director Wilson Barrie was leading the talks, in discussion with Gary Palmer, the head of Sodexho UK - and they were probably in touch with the company's international leadership. It was a big defeat for them.

So why did you win?

We won because we organised. When we

started this claim in May 2001, we were lucky to have 20 members. Now there are 342. We set our own agenda, we did not work to management's agenda. And we were prepared to strike. In fact the only reason we won was the strike - there was no way Sodexho would have conceded without that.

It was an escalating strike?

Yes, we were escalating at every step of the way. We never gave them the chance to get ahead of us. Sodexho were under pressure everywhere - but most important was at home in the Infirmary and the support we were getting there. The company had pressure from the Trust, the public, politicians, the Health & Safety Executive, Environmental Health Department. Everyone weighed in over the dire conditions inside the hospital and photos were published in the local media.

I think there was also political pressure at the highest level of the union. The strike was becoming too high profile, exposing privatisation. It was becoming an embarrassment.

What about other Sodexho workers?

I believe that our victory will give others the confidence to pursue their own claims. Even if the company thought they'd nip this in the bud before it spreads, claims may go ahead elsewhere anyway, and they should.

We've been trying to get a combine, and here in Scotland we definitely will. But organising a UK wide meeting of UNISON is a priority now.

Carolyn adds:

"This was a sweeping victory for Trade Union organisation. We first submitted the claim with a membership of less than 20. We balloted 222 and now have 342 members, well over 90% density and many new but now invaluable activists. This was a David and Goliath battle between the lowest paid workers and a brutal multinational who pulled out all the stops to defeat us. They failed."

Frank Morgan, Sodexho Stewards' Convenor, was ecstatic.

"We've been kept down, exploited and bullied for profit for too long. Now that we've won, Sodexho will know they won't get away with it ever again."