MARS ATTACKS!

THE INVASION BEGINS

WASTEWATER OPERATIONS PREPARES FOR CARNAGE
UNISON’s policy on the EU referendum was rightly, in my view, to remain but of course the vote went the other way.

What the Union now needs to do more than ever before, is to protect Worker’s rights, terms and conditions of service and campaign for a General Election well before the scheduled date in 2020.

The delegates from the branch to this year’s National Delegates, Water, Environment & Transport & Energy Conferences were active with the four WET delegates each moving a motion and me supporting one submitted by Thames Water branch.

I moved a motion at NDC for the National Executive Council for the first time (see pic) and all were carried.

The Core Officer Group within the branch had a successful meeting in Chester in May which determined our priorities for the next branch year ending in March 2017.

These initiatives will be monitored constantly and be reviewed at our development event in Penrith in November.

Since my last column, I’ve met with several Labour and SNP MP’s who support the Union’s excellent campaign to ensure the whole of the Water Industry pays the proper living wage including outsourced parts.

Our long serving branch employee, Diane Rimmer took early retirement in April (see page 8) and we now have a new administrator on board, Chris Yates, who job-shares the role with Sharon Travis giving branch office 42 hours coverage over 5 days.

I also attended the excellent Durham Miners Gala in July as part of the N W delegation which is an excellent family working class day out.

I’m due once again to meet with others from the Union’s national body, Cathryn Ross, Chief Executive of OFWAT in August to share common ground of UNISON’s agenda which she broadly supports.

So, how did Brexit leave you, Michael?

The post- Brexit future is far from certain, but many people in the fields of science and medical research are gravely concerned that the loss of EU funding will have serious consequences for their work. The fears around workers rights are also palpable; particularly around maternity rights and the Working Time Directive.

And what of our pensions? Will future UK governments show any commitment to protecting them? Defined Benefit pension schemes are already ‘in crisis’ according to former pensions minister Ross Altmann – something which many in United Utilities will be acutely aware of.

Yet there was little conversation about the impact of Brexit on the UK Water industry, nor how water quality could be affected – something which is of major concern for many UK businesses who have strong links to Europe. EU directives have made a huge contribution to forcing countries to consider the impact of water quality, sustainability and usage. Will the same consideration be given to these matters in a post-Brexit future without the influence of Brussels?

Working within a European Union provided the partner nations with an opportunity for mutual cooperation to work together on technological advances that had an impact on a global scale. It is possible that Brexit will put up barriers to these partnerships across Europe at a time when the pooling of resources was beginning to successfully support scientific advancements.

Without the level of funding and grants that are currently available, there is likely to be an adverse impact on the level of research that can be achieved. EU-wide research grants are hugely important for the Water industry; particularly in the drive for efficiency and innovation. The UK has been at the forefront of these advancements and their commercial availability to the wider world.

Many leaders in the field of Water innovation are aware that the industry doesn’t always attract the level of funding that goes to other alternative energy sources. There is now a further risk of falling behind with innovation and development outside the EU.

Of course, many others will argue that Brexit will mean less ‘red tape’ and, thus, more innovation and investment in some areas. Equally, the UK could secure more home-grown financial investment via other sources and form alliances with organisations and economies outside the UK. This investment could lead to a commercialisation that is currently not available under EU rules.

Brexit uncertainty has already cost North-West listed companies £1.4 billion, according to accountancy firm Deloitte. However, UU has bucked the trend, so far, as investors - wary of a volatile market - have put their money into ‘safe’ utilities where income growth is always considered to be steady. UU saw a growth rate of 12% after Brexit, but this is clearly a short-term response. Troubled waters may well lie ahead.

Dear U3,

I wanted to say thank you to Ray Devers who has been helping me with redeployment issues, he has worked hard, been caring and has given me so much of his time and expertise. He has also been ably assisted by Shirley Kelsall. Regards,

Name and Work Location withheld by request
Bit of a stink… Business Retail, that most secretive of billing departments in UU, is currently operating out of an office block designed for 70 but presently housing 200 staff, and there are only two washrooms on the premises. There are rumours drifting from there that all is not well with the new billing system, and, so close to merging with Severn Trent and moving its operation to Stoke, it’s allegedly squeaky bum time – but such is the secrecy surrounding Retail Billing this has proved difficult to confirm. What can be confirmed is that the limited toilet facilities are working satisfactorily, which is just as well, given the hammering they’re being given. And, nice touch of irony, the building is called Clean Water House…

Houses of the Holy… Sue Amies-King, who joined United Utilities in June 2012 as Business Retail Director will become the Chief Executive of Water Plus, the joint venture between United Utilities and Severn Trent, combining the two companies’ business retail billing operation. As readers know from the previous issue of U3, this means some of 280 UU employees affected by this move could be expected to relocate to Stoke or potentially lose their jobs. Ms. Amies-King however has no such anxieties and, as an enthusiastic tweeter and texter, she regularly updates followers, including some UNISON members who may have to move, on her plans to relocate to a leafy area of Stoke and on the lavish expensive executive homes she’s looking at. The good news for Sue is that the UU Billing clerks, on an annual salary of £19,000, are not likely to be buying houses in her new neighbourhood. But thanks for the tweets #insensitive…

Use Your Illusion I… An inadvertent aside revealed much about the shambles that is Commercial Billing Market Reform (and, very possibly in our lifetime, Domestic Billing). This is the ‘opening up’ of the market for competitors to ‘bill’ big businesses anywhere in the country for the water services they use (though it will still be the local water company which will actually provide the water). For it was during a presentation to a trade union forum at Lingley Mere recently of how the whole sorry thing is meant to work, with arcane rules, calculus and, er, stuff, just to create the illusion of choice. When a question was posed about the sense and wisdom behind it all – especially if domestic billing was also opened up – the answer came back, “It’s hard to see how this will benefit the customer.”

And more: when asked by the unions if water ‘competition’ would be along the lines of previous market competitions, like gas and electricity, the answer came back, “Yes”. “The same mess then?” asked the unions. Silence was the reply…

Use Your Illusion II… That your local water provider is still responsible for catching the water, treating the water, delivering the water and taking its waste version away, and that water, pressure, flow and quality will not change irrespective of who you pay undermines any sense of true competition: It is a financial slight-of-hand allowing big business to save money, as usual. But, just to nail on the point, the UU-Severn-Trent Joint venture, WaterPlus, will control 25% of the market on day one!

On the Domestic Front… And while on all matters billing, it is with some sadness the Third Eye reports that Domestic Billing Director (and favourite of this column) Gary Dixon has taken this shaky shake up as his opportunity to leave the business. He had a swanky leaving-do (missed post-Brexit Blues?… Evidently someone in the Health & Safety Department at United Utilities took the outcome of the EU Referendum rather badly. On the Monday after Friday’s shock result a Company-wide safety email about davits failing on some sites (below) arrived in people’s inboxes with a political comment sneaked in. The email was withdrawn and reissued shortly after. Obviously the perpetrator is no fan of David Cameron, but then again, who is?…

Serious Charges… Hear the one about the private security firm facing a criminal investigation by Lincolnshire Police after five of its employees allegedly attempted to boost performance figures by making hundreds of fake calls to a 999 centre? The five were suspended after allegedly making more than 1,000 “test calls” – many reported at quiet times when they could be picked up quickly. Without them G4S (for it was they) would have missed key targets of answering 92% of calls within 10 seconds in November and December 2015, thus incurring a financial penalty. A shadow police minister said: “Emergency response times mean the difference between life and death – yet call data appears to have been manipulated for financial gain. Time and again G4S have let down the public.”

G4S signed up to run the centre in 2012 in a deal worth £200 million. This incident comes only months after staff at G4S-run Medway youth offender centre in Kent were suspended amid allegations of severe mistreatment. In January, the Serious Fraud Office was called in to investigate G4S for overcharging for the tagging of criminals. This overcharging of the Government by the company and its rival Serco came to “tens of millions of pounds”.

G4S was also criticised last year after one of its sub-contractors painted the front doors of asylum seekers red.

And why, you may ask, is the Eye reporting on the travails of G4S? Perhaps because the company took on a new non-executive director in May—none other than UU’s very own Steve Mogford! …

Anti-social Security… Our Steve replaces outgoing senior independent director Mark Elliott and will, upon appointment, also become a non-executive director of the G4S board. As Mr Elliott earned around £64k a year and owned around £25k worth of shares, Mr Mogford will be more secure with G4S. Commenting on the appointment, G4S chair John Connolly praised his new boy’s “broad experience” and how “this extensive involvement with businesses in international markets, will be extremely valuable to our board and will broaden the capabilities and … Continued over}
experience of our board of directors..."
And they may well need those capabilities and experience to help improve their international standing. In the past, G4S has been accused of not contributing to sustainable development, not respecting the right of their employees to be represented by a trade union, driving down wages and conditions in several countries where it operates, and denying workers basic rights by cutting healthcare and other benefits. As a result of this, Union Network International called G4s “the worst face of global capitalism.”

Our Steve and his new chums may have their work cut out...

Mars Attacks!!!!! As if blighting the working lives of Wastewater Process Controllers isn’t enough, the whole MARS programme is beginning to have an undesirable effect on other – unrelated – parts of the business now. To install the necessary software to operate the whole MARS programme there was a weekend ‘down’ of the main SAP systems in June. Once rebooted, the field-to-centre systems for Water Network failed, forcing everyone back to emails and phone calls. There followed a night-time reboot, and the next day even the Mobex phone numbers had stopped working. Calls to the IT help desk gave a clue to the calamity: the answer machine’s first suggestion was “If your problem is related to MARS please press 9 now...” The fact that MARS has its own dedicated help line at this stage of its gestation does not auger well for the future. Never mind Life on Mars... The old ones are the best... And the new android phones issued to Wastewater Operations as part of the MARS programme aren’t proving popular with staff in some rural areas where mobile phone reception is poor—which probably accounts for quite a few...
TTIP POST BREXIT

Little discussion of value took place in the media during the Referendum coverage about TTIP (the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership). TTIP is a trade agreement being negotiated between the USA and the EU and one that Mark Dearn, senior trade campaigner for War On Want, described as “a huge threat to our democracy, human rights and the fight against climate change.”

U3 has been covering developments in the TTIP talks over 18 months ago, and reported in U3 80 that President Obama attempted to “fast track” the negotiations in light of the fact that the tide in Europe had begun to shift against TTIP. As the contents of this secret treaty started to leak out, campaigners organised against it - and the anti-TTIP campaign went from strength to strength.

European politicians, including French President François Hollande and Germany’s agriculture minister, Christian Schmidt, have signalled their opposition to the US’s current proposals with Mr Hollande saying France was opposed to “unregulated free trade”.

Furthermore, more than 3 million Europeans have signed Europe’s biggest petition to oppose TTIP, while 250,000 Germans took to the streets of Berlin last autumn to try to bring this deal down. A new opinion poll shows only 18% of Americans and 17% of Germans support TTIP, down from 53% and 55% just two years ago.

The likelihood is that the European Union will, if not thoroughly reject TTIP, then at least make significant amendments, especially to controversial clauses like the Investor State Dispute System (ISDS). ISDS would allow companies to sue the British government for “unfairness” if, for instance, the British government made a decision, say, to outlaw dangerous chemicals, improve food safety or put cigarettes in plain packaging. And by unfairness this simply means they can’t make as much profit as they expected. The “trial” would be held as a special tribunal, overseen by corporate lawyers.

This is the benefit of belonging to a large collective; its sheer size and influence will give the US plenty to think about – and without doubt the US needs the EU as much as the EU needs the US. So there is plenty of room for compromise.

It would be different if you were a small nation, with little negotiating strength or influence.

Which, following the vote to leave the European Union, is what Britain now is.

But, significantly, by leaving the EU Britain will not be subject to any of TTIP’s regulations, whether amended or not.

This doesn’t mean to say Britain won’t trade with the USA. Of course it will; but what kind of deal will it feel compelled to sign, since Britain will need the US more than the US will need Britain?

Campaigners against TTIP fear that Britain will negotiate an “even more disastrous” agreement after it leaves the European Union.

Nick Dearden, director of Global Justice Now, said the “right-wing lurch of Brexit” could result in Britain signing up to “TTIP on steroids”.

“Alongside US lobbyists, the British government has done everything possible to push the most extreme and toxic version of TTIP,” he said. “So there’s every reason to suspect that the UK will look to develop a bilateral deal with the USA that could end up being even more disastrous for labour protections, consumer standards and public services than TTIP was going to be.”

“Progressives on both sides of debate need to work towards a trade framework built on equality, fairness for workers and the redistribution of wealth towards those communities who have rebelled so vehemently against the political establishment this morning,” he told the Morning Star.

It is unclear if TTIP will apply to countries that are not in the EU but which are members of the common market, such as Norway. The Norwegian model has been suggested as a possible option for a post-Brexit Britain.

John Hilary, executive director of War on Want, said anti-TTIP activists would now have to refocus their campaign.

“The UK is going to have to renegotiate all of its trade deals. It’s up to us as activists to press for the positive trade agenda we never got in the EU,” he said.

But Mr Hilary sounded a positive note, saying the British government was democratically accountable to the people where the European Commission was not. “For us, the situation is now a different one. The powers are going to be brought back to Britain,” he said. “The future is ours to claim. It’s an uphill struggle because we know that in this country traditionally we have had the most neoliberal governments in Europe, whether they be Tory or New Labour.”

He said the future was unclear as the UK would now have to negotiate a new relationship with the EU.
Sadly, we have said goodbye to a number of colleagues during the months April to June through their expressions of interest in taking redundancy as an option. This is not a voluntary redundancy scheme, as these were compulsory redundancies, but the company chose to allow expressions to be taken where the business requirements allowed this to be fulfilled. This has meant some members took up this opportunity and have now left the company.

The CMG contract redundancy consultation has been very much a topic of discussion among colleagues at Bolton. There have been so many rumours about the next phase of redundancies, and seeing good colleagues leave is never great. The senior management need to be acknowledged in the way they have handled this redundancy consultation, and particularly the support that has been offered to those leaving. When the operations director says he wants to do everything possible to help keep people in a job whether it is working for Serco or a new employer, it gives much confidence to colleagues. However, there are no illusions about the situation and there will be a gradual reduction of staff towards the contract end in December 2017.

Initially, the possibility of further redundancies in September was being touted as the next date. This was dependant on the PIP contract with the DWP being extended. The PIP has now been extended to February 2017 and this has a knock-on effect on the CMG contract as many colleagues are seconded from CMG to PIP contract. The good news is that the PIP contract extension has put back any further redundancies to December 2017.

During the formal consultation we will be revisiting the scoring criteria for redundancy as some data will need updating. As previously communicated, let me be clear, the selection pools and selection criteria are those the Company decided to proceed with. There needs to be a clear understanding that this has not been agreed or ‘rubber stamped’ by UNISON.

It is always UNISON policy to make a contribution and influence the consultation process in the interest of members. However, we will always ensure that any potential future disputes or challenges are not hindered. This means any selection criteria or selection pool is not agreed as this may contradict any potential cases from being challenged if needed.

We have continued to recruit new members and urge all members to talk to their colleagues about joining UNISON. At Bolton, we held a membership recruitment event in July which went well. And don’t forget every member you sign up entitles you to a £5 vouchers (terms apply).

At Phoenix House we have no representative and I wish to issue another plea for members based there to get in touch with me if they are willing to step up and become a steward. Full training and support will be provided, including mentoring/shadowing. Please contact me for a discussion and hopefully we can ensure members at Phoenix have a local representative. As always, I am available to visit if required for formal meetings.

Finally, as always, please feel free to send any comments to me at anum.iqbal@serco.com

Even on the proper living wage, it would take nearly 130 years for the lowest paid employees in the water industry to earn the same as the highest paid director in the sector does in 12 months, according to new research recently published by UNISON.

This analysis of pay at the UK’s 19 water companies reveals a worrying gulf between those at the top and those at the bottom of the wages league, says UNISON.

In April, UNISON’s campaign for a Living Wage across the whole of the UK’s water industry – Making Waves for the Living Wage – was highlighted at an event in parliament.

The campaign aims to improve the pay of thousands of water company employees currently struggling to make ends meet on less than the living wage of £8.25 per hour (£9.40 in London).

The research shows that it would still take 128 years for the lowest-paid staff at United Utilities to take home the equivalent of the £2.2m wages of the company’s highest paid director, even if they were paid the living wage.

Launching the campaign, UNISON general secretary Dave Prentis said: “The water companies are making huge profits, and are paying their top executives huge salaries. They could easily afford to start paying their lowest-paid employees a proper living wage. And even if they put a stop to this stingy approach to pay and see at least a living wage paid throughout the industry.”

UNISON wrote to the boards of the UK’s water companies to ask them whether they were planning to become living wage employers. As a result of the union’s approach, some are now talking to the Living Wage Foundation about becoming accredited living wage employers. UNISON intends to keep up the pressure on those companies who have yet to make any move towards the living wage.

At the time of U3 going to press, United Utilities have still to commit to paying the Living Wage.

Delegates promote The Making Waves for the Living Wage Campaign at UNISON’s Brighton Conference in June.
Has put back any further redundancies to the CMG contract as many colleagues are being extended. The PIP has now become a contract with the DWP (Personal Independence Pay).

Initially, the possibility of further redundancies to be taken where the business need to be acknowledged in the consultation and formal meetings. Available to visit if required for members at Phoenix have a local representative. As always, I am here to get in touch with me if any potential future disputes or issues from being challenged if this may contradict any potential future disputes or issues by UNISON.

It is always UNISON policy to ensure that the consultation process in accordance with members. The selection pools and recruitment event in July which went well. And don’t forget every member you sign up entitles them to the Living Wage – was established by UNISON.

In April, UNISON’s campaign to pay and see at least a living wage, many – including Thames Water, Anglian Water and Wessex Water, Northumbrian Water and Scottish Water – are putting their telematics provision out of ‘advanced’ telematics systems – although with the addition of a back-facing camera too.

Meanwhile, further north, Scottish Water are putting their telematics provision out to tender and are also proposing similarly intrusive systems—although with the addition of a back-facing camera too.

Unions up there are not discounting a ballot for industrial action if these proposals go ahead…

HA ‘Outrage’?… About now, United Utilities should be coming back to the unions with its revised DB Pension Scheme closure proposals – but it’s all gone suspiciously quiet. Other than the news that UU’s annual top-up of the scheme has now gone up to £44 million conveniently slipped out, nothing. Now rumour abhors a vacuum and one credible rumour doing the rounds is that UU is delaying the talks to avoid upsetting and unsettling workers whose commitment and goodwill is required for a major capital project.

The Haweswater Aqueduct (or HA) Outage has been years in the planning and needs the buy-in of workers across many disciplines; in other words, the older, experienced and skilled technical field staff – who will mostly be in the DB Pension Scheme. The last thing the company needs during such a sensitive operation as the HA Outage is a ballot for Industrial Action followed swiftly by a “worker out-age”…

Bankrober… It’s holiday time again, and some field workers may find they have more holidays to take than they realised. It has come to light that some areas of the business have not been allowing workers who are on standby on the day before a bank holiday a half day in lieu. A network manager questioned this and, under UNISON pressure, contacted HR who agreed with the union’s position. It transpires that in at least one network area the practice of claiming half a day in lieu for a bank holiday was stopped potentially over as much as ten years ago! There’ll be some men and women looking at a nice little boost to their annual leave this year. Thank UNISON for that, if you must…
Diane Rimmer, our Branch Administrator, has retired after almost 38 years working in the Water Industry and our Trade Union. In fact, 32 years of that time she was solely employed by our Branch.

Diane joined NALGO, the fore-runner of UNISON, as a member when she started with North West Water Authority in 1978 because, as she told U3, “it was what you did.” In 1984 she spotted an advert for a clerk/typist with NALGO and started working in its office in Dawson House, NWWA’s HQ.

Diane’s been at Branch Office supporting members and stewards through major events such as the Water Industry privatisation, then when NALGO merged with NUPE and COHSE to create UNISON, when NWW Ltd bought Norweb and became United Utilities; and two branches merged to become UU Branch; for over three decades Diane has worked in the background, her hard work rarely recognised by most members, yet without her this branch would not have performed as highly as it has.

The Branch had a farewell lunch for her, and friends and colleagues old and new wished her a happy retirement. Diane told U3, “Over the years I’ve seen stewards, branch officers and members come and go – now it’s my turn to go.”

UU announced that due to the excessive amount of overtime and ‘the cost to serve per customer’ being £40 as opposed to Yorkshire Water’s £30 ‘cost to serve’, new working patterns needed to be introduced to the Retail Billing section.

Another reason cited was that UUs customers couldn’t contact Billing after 6pm weekdays or at weekends.

A UNISON working group was involved in the consultation process and helped steer the new shifts towards family- and school-hours-friendly work patterns; we also amended shifts to suit workers who wanted four long days and so on.

It has not been easy. Before these changes there was significant division, with some workers doing the ‘standard’ day while the majority did flexi-shifts, including lates and weekends. The new arrangements won’t please all but we believe they are fairer.

UNISON has played a key role in securing a practical and realistic selection of shifts from which members could make a choice, and we hope everyone got their first preference in the selection process. Of course, it’s not ideal that people have to work some Saturdays and that we cover until 8pm, but UU is a twenty-four hour operation for many other employees and call centres are open 8am to 8pm.

Bearing all that in mind, the outcome has been far better than we could have expected, and our Reps on the working group worked terrifically hard to achieve this.

Our members who have been unable to align to a shift have been supported by UNISON.

Justice for Part-Time Workers

In March 2014 it was agreed that part-time workers who worked over 7 hours a day were entitled to two 15 minute breaks.

This was never implemented by Workforce Planning, so until this agreement came to light in March 2016 the part-time workers had only one 20 minute break during their working day.

When I was informed about this I approached UU for look for recognition and recompense. However, UU said it was under no obligation to pay or offer time off in lieu for this error.

Six members were told that nothing could be done retrospectively though the company did agree to implement the appropriate two breaks in the day. The members were clearly disappointed by the company’s approach as they had given loyal service to UU, some of over 20 years.

I took this matter to the Retail Forum and was able to secure these members an extra day off to compensate them for the time of which they have been deprived.

Through the determination and support of the membership UNISON has secured the correct rest breaks for part-time workers and recompense those who have lost out.