

## **Most significant problems for UK arch workers**

Pay - Architectural worker pay in the UK is now brushing minimum wage for fresh graduates. Many Part IIs (the name for workers who have finished their postgraduate degree) fail to earn a Living Wage, as all workers in any RIBA chartered practice are meant to. Fully qualified pay remains very limited compared to other professions and industries, newly qualified architects earning about the same as entry level local authority jobs.

Overtime - Unpaid overtime is endemic in UK architecture. A survey by the RIBA in the past year indicated that the average architectural worker does X hours of overtime per week. We've had reports of workers doing overtime until they were admitted to A&E with stroke-like symptoms. The extremes of overtime coupled with low pay means that a shockingly large portion of Part Is and IIs not only do not earn living wage, but do not even earn minimum wage.

## **Broader Political, Social Context**

As with most things in the UK, architectural practice was largely privatised in the 1980s. Prior to this decade half of architects were directly employed by the public sector within local governments (and thus came under public sector unions), and a significant portion of the built environment was commissioned by local government itself. Now an extremely small proportion of architects work within the public sector and private developers procure almost all new architecture in the UK. This shift was coupled with the abolition of the Fee Scale, which mandated architects to charge certain minimums for work, as it was determined to be uncompetitive. Alongside this a massive expansion of higher education in the following decades increased the supply of qualified architectural labour.

The unconstrained competition brought about by the abolition of the fee scale encouraged bosses to undercut each other to win jobs, and began driving down architectural fees. Fortunately for them, the impact of reduced fees could easily be passed down to architectural workers - an unionised workforce, with an influx of supply from both an expanded higher education programme and gutted public sector. Ideologically primed to sacrifice themselves in service of architecture, architectural workers would work the long unpaid overtime hours that was needed to deliver projects with undercut fees and swallow the accompanying stagnant pay.

That was a long run up, but I think it's good to get the bases covered! The process I outlined has now effectively met the statutory boundaries of minimum wage. The body posited to represent architects - the RIBA - has no solution to problem, but is sure to identify it every year and proceed to do nothing about it. These conditions at last have prompted a turn towards unionisation.

## **Are there trade unions or collective bodies that represent working architects and technical workers, and if so, what kind of actions do they undertake?**

Yes! I am branch secretary of Unite-SAW, a branch of Unite The Union that represents architectural workers. We work to organise the sector and support our members in the fight for better conditions. We're a highly active branch, holding monthly meetings with an attendance of 20-40 people, with 11 elected committee members and many engaged lay members that take part in the activities and work we do. You've hopefully seen some of this with the recent news about the BIG London office, where workers under threat of redundancy came to us and managed to recruit a huge amount of their office and

meaningfully challenge the redundancy process - I think this will be a useful framework to explain the work of our branch.

Our central focus is the Workplace Organising group, which when approached by BIG workers in late December helped by educating them on mapping their workplace and developing skills to speak to colleagues about the union to build membership and power. It then guided and supported them through the conflict with their employer. Our working group Advice & Support provides members with support on individual issues where we have to pursue more statutory means to defend them, and so helped with BIG by speaking to individual members about visa issues and potential Unfair Dismissal claims. Our Membership group oversees our members and keeps them updated and engaged, and helped by phone banking our new members at BIG to give them a crucial 1 to 1 welcome and introduction to the union. Finally, our Campaigns working group deals with the public face of the union and facilitated the extensive press presence and coverage we managed at our demonstration on Tuesday and helped hone messaging to the press. All of this also happens with extensive support from Unite itself, particularly on the legal and organising fronts.

**What initiatives does your collective pursue? What are their goals, and what could be done in the future to improve the conditions of the working majority?**

Unions are really the only avenue we see to improve conditions for the majority of architectural workers. No one is coming to save us - not the RIBA, ARB or any potential government. We find architects are often enthralled by authority and legal structures, and when they encounter unfairness at work it can be hard to get them to understand that there's no legal recourse to these issues or authority to appeal to to step in and solve them. Fortunately, experience is the best teacher, and in inflamed situations like the one at BIG you would be surprised how quickly previously timid and less political workers can come to understand the material difference between them and their bosses and that collective action is the only leverage they have. For instance, workers at BIG were told that associate redundancies were out of the question because it would 'damage morale' - a clear admission that the feelings of managers mattered and that their feelings were irrelevant. Events like these draw the line clearly between boss and worker, in a sector where it is often obfuscated through the small size of practices and the vocational rhetoric of the profession.