**Fair Pay Fortnight: wages for living not existing**

Today is the midpoint of the TUC’s Fair Pay Fortnight campaign, where we are campaigning for fairer pay and to get all MPs and political parties to focus on the need for Britain to get a pay rise. Fair Pay is a key issue, as since 2010 workers have had a drop in wages of £1,321 in real terms which is equivalent to:

* 23 average weekly household shops (food and non-alcoholic drinks) or
* A year’s energy bills for the average household or
* 28 tanks of fuel for the average car

The issue around lifting many low paid families out of in-work poverty was sadly not addressed in the Chancellor’s Budget, something which is of increasing concern to families of hard working people who are being squeezed harder and harder. Working families are experiencing the biggest pressure on their living standards since Victorian times. Pay has been squeezed at all levels below the boardroom and it’s costing our economy dear.

Extending the living wage is a vital way of tackling the growing problem of in-work poverty across Britain.  Currently, a whopping 22% of workers across the North East are paid less than a living wage of £7.65, with this figure rising to almost 40% in some sub-regional areas. People in our region are struggling – the North East needs a pay rise.

On a positive note, the number of living wage employers is growing rapidly and unions are playing their part in encouraging more employers to sign up and pay up, but government must demonstrate equal tenacity and initiative.

We need to see a far greater commitment to pay the living wage from government and employers, and modern wages councils which could set higher minimum rates in industries where employers can afford to pay their staff more.

The conservatives will claim that raising the personal tax allowance will help low paid workers. However, this supposedly ‘pro-poor’ policy actually helps middle income and richer households the most.  It is no good giving low-income households a £200 or so income tax cut if you then take thousands more from higher VAT and tax credit cuts. This is a very expensive and poorly directed policy at best and at worst, it is self-defeating and detrimental to those it is supposed to help.

It’s not about paying lip-service – it’s about paying higher wages. During Fair Pay Fortnight we’re asking workers to back our call to MPs to get all political parties to put decent pay at the top of their agendas in the run up to the election.

Our region desperately needs to end poverty pay and I hope this timely campaign will help make a difference.

Beth Farhat

Northern TUC Regional Secretary