

THE STAGE

Equity receives 'hate mail and abuse' over redundancy process in Scotland

NEWS FEB 11, 2021 BY GEORGIA SNOW



Equity general secretary Paul Fleming. Photo: Mark Thomas

Unrest within Equity is deepening following the conclusion of a controversial redundancy process in its Scotland office, as the union claims it has faced hate mail and "abuse" in response.

It comes as members continue to criticise the decision to lose a long-serving official as "unjustified", and warn that Equity's handling of the situation could permanently damage their trust in the union.

Equity has now issued a statement in which it claims a staff member received a "poison-pen letter" containing abusive language to their home address. It has condemned some of the behaviour associated with the campaign against the restructure and said some people had "abandoned all sense of reasoned discussion in favour of abuse".

"Some of the language and assertions that have been directed at the general secretary, other staff and unpaid activists do not represent reasonable debate," it said, claiming that individuals had been called "Nazis" and "Stalinists" and been subject to mental-health slurs.

The [growing turmoil follows news of a staff restructure within the union](#), and is primarily focused on changes to its Glasgow office. Lorne Boswell, a long-standing member of staff, has been made redundant, meaning it will be staffed by one full-time officer instead of two.

Responsibilities for Equity's Northern Irish members will no longer lie with the Glasgow office, and Equity intends to recruit a part-time official in Belfast next year.

The union said these staffing changes were part of a wider restructure prompted by the coronavirus crisis, and were needed to secure its future.

Five redundancies are taking place, Equity said, which will save it £1.1 million over three years.

Members in Scotland and Northern Ireland have strongly opposed the changes, and have accused the union of a lack of transparency. More than 3,000 people have signed [an online petition calling for an end to compulsory redundancies within Equity](#).

Boswell's redundancy process has now concluded, Equity confirmed in a statement.

"Equity and Lorne Boswell, represented by Unite the Union, have reached agreement, following consultation, for voluntary redundancy after 32 years of dedicated service. This difficult and challenging process is a result of the unprecedented threats to our industry, and thus to our union itself due to the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. Equity wishes Lorne the best. Lorne thanks Equity for the amazing opportunity to work with Equity members over the last 30 years and wishes Equity the best for a continuing strong response to the current pandemic crisis," it said.

Equity's Scottish National Committee said it was "saddened but not surprised" at the conclusion and expressed "deep disappointment" that the union "chose not to listen to the hundreds of members in Scotland and Northern Ireland who opposed what we feel is a wholly unjustified and unnecessary redundancy".

It described Boswell's departure as "an immeasurable loss to the union".

It added: "This process may have concluded but it continues to raise serious concerns around the rationale behind it, its implementation and what the future holds for Equity in Northern Ireland and Scotland. As a committee, we have made our position on these matters very clear but have been left with many unanswered questions – as have the members.

"By implementing these proposals, [Equity] has now lost the trust of a great number of members across Scotland and Northern Ireland – a trust that may never be regained."

In Equity's later statement, the union maintained that, despite the redundancy, Glasgow would continue to be the "best-staffed Equity office per member" and said the new post in Northern Ireland would make it better represented than ever.

It said it agreed that members were "well within their rights to disagree with union decisions" and that many had engaged constructively, but warned that a small number had made inaccurate statements and had "brought the union into disrepute".

"No matter how passionately we feel about a decision of the union, we cannot engage in abusive language toward fellow members of staff – we must direct our energies against the entrenched interests of reckless engagers, producers and governments who are not supporting our members or our industries," it said.