

## Ferry workforce ready to take industrial action

RMT members at ferry operator CalMac have voted for strike action and action short of a strike, according to the union.

The maritime union issued ballot papers to hundreds of its members last month in a dispute over jobs, pensions and working conditions.

Members voted by 92% for strike action and by 98% for action short of a strike in a turnout of 60%, the union confirmed.

Overall, 55% of the total number eligible to vote backed strike action and 58% of the total eligible voted for action short of a strike.

The RMT said the industrial relationship with CalMac on the Clyde and Hebrides network has "deteriorated" in recent months.

## No fears about housing target, says Minister



COMMUNITIES Minister Alex Neil has dismissed a warning by Scotland's former spending watchdog that

there is a "growing housing crisis" in Scotland.

A report by the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing states that there are over 150,000 households on social housing waiting lists, nearly a million in fuel poverty, 60,000 in overcrowded accommodation and ownership is an "unachievable pipedream" for many.

Mr Neil said that the Scottish Government will exceed its target of 30,000 new homes by 2016.

## Scottish deaths at highest level for 15 years

DEATHS in Scotland were at their highest level in 15 years in the first quarter of this year, according to new figures.

There were 16,521 deaths registered in the first three months of this year, 18.4 per cent more than in the same period of 2014, statistics from the National Records of Scotland show.

This was the highest number of first-quarter deaths since 2000, although levels remain substantially lower than those seen in the 1980s, the Scottish Government said.

The main drivers of the increase were deaths from respiratory diseases and circulatory diseases.

## CO-OWNER GIVES US A GUIDED TOUR - AND WARNS TIME

# 'I don't know how long the Egyptian Halls can last'

By VICTORIA BRENNAN  
Senior Reporter

ONCE regarded as one of the finest, architecturally impressive buildings in Glasgow, the Egyptian Halls is now a sad and forlorn sight.

Covered in a shroud that hints at its former glory, the 142-year-old Grade A-listed building, which has stood empty for 30 years, is propped up and on its last legs.

Its owners were dealt another blow this month with the refusal of a £5m lottery bid they had hoped could kick-start a long-overdue renovation for the Union Street giant designed by Alexander 'Greek' Thomson.

They warn time is running out for the three-storey site, which was granted permission to become a 114-bedroom hotel in 2012.

The entrance, at 92 Union Street, is unremarkable and gives no hint of any of the faded - and failing - grandeur inside.

As co-owner Derek Souter lifts up the grill and opens the door, a dimly-lit staircase is visible behind.

The electricity has long since been switched off and the only light is a shaft from



Co-owner Derek Souter outside the Egyptian Halls in Union Street

the open door. "We've met with so many people from Glasgow City Council over the years in discussions about this," the Dundee-based businessman says. "At last count it was 64."

Up the flight of stairs we step into a former Chinese restaurant on the first floor. The room still bears traces of its oriental heritage, with patches of red flocked wallpaper and mirrored columns.

Piles of masonry and stones are dotted around the dark room but the structure itself remains fairly solid.

"The hoarding we put up in 2006 has helped dry the build-

form the building into "one of the best-looking hotels in the UK". Investors for the hotel have already been lined up but repairs to the building need to be partly paid for by those in the ground-floor units, Mr Souter says, which adds complications.

His long-term plan is to turn the ground-floor units into bars and restaurants, reinstating some of the hidden Thomson columns and ceilings which are hidden behind suspended ceilings at the moment.

"You've got a treasure trove of Thomson architecture there," he says, pointing upwards. "The bars and restaurants would look incredible."

**We have had so many discussions about this - at the last count it was 64**

He also envisages knocking down the NCP car park at the back of the halls, creating a thoroughfare from Central Station. "Union Street has had nothing done to it for years," he adds. "People need to look at the long-term plan and not be short-sighted."

Up the stairs again and we're on the second floor, home to a former tax training office. Signs are still clear on



Despite a shabby appearance,

## IS RUNNING OUT FOR THE BUILDING

the walls, indicating former classrooms, a reception area and tutors room.

The second floor is much lighter and sunlight streams through, highlighting the peeling paint, timber frames which have rotted away in places, and further piles of masonry on the floor.

Mr Souter says water has penetrated narrow columns higher up, causing intricate stone carvings on top to collapse. They lie in a heap in a corner on the second floor, together with bags containing masonry that has fallen down.

He says the hoarding has saved the public from potentially serious accidents, with eight lumps tumbling down in the past year.

"It's impossible to say how long the building will last," he says. "We have asked for a

meeting with the council to discuss a way forward. We need to deal with the long-term prospects for Union Street and Egyptian Halls and marry them together."

It's been a long time since the Halls last saw any signs of life and Mr Souter is hopeful it will again. "It needs to move forward - whether it's demolition or refurbishment," he says. "If you put 17 years of your life into preserving something, you don't want that to fail. We love the building."

The spokesman said the city council had been involved with discussions about the future of the halls for a number of years and would be available for further discussions. He said: "Hopefully a solution will be found at some point to fully redevelop the Egyptian Halls."



Some of the Alexander 'Greek' Thomson-designed details are crumbling

# Union says 'pay test' is an insult

Homelessness workers reject council's offer

By RACHEL LOXTON

STRIKING homelessness workers have rejected a pay deal from the council.

Trades union Unison branded the offer by Glasgow City Council to give 70 homelessness case workers a wage rise by increasing their pay grade on the condition they pass a competency test an "insult".

The staff have been on strike for nearly 12 weeks in the dispute over their pay grade.

The homelessness case workers argue that they do a job equivalent to case workers in other departments who are on a higher pay grade, taking home £5000 a year more.

A spokesman for the council said "We are bitterly disappointed that Uni-

son has rejected this fantastic opportunity for their members to gain a pay rise in excess of £5000 and advance their careers.

"The offer was open to all of the striking caseworkers and was subject only to those staff demonstrating their competence at the new grade."

However Unison convenor Ian Leech said there was an issue of distrust be-

**Our members feel the council is trying to divide them**

tween the strikers and the staff.

Mr Leech said the competency test was understood to be an interview.

He said: "The workers have already displayed their competence so to offer them an interview after nearly 12 weeks of striking is a bit of an insult."

"We had a discussion

about that proposal and the staff said they didn't want to hear anymore.

"Our members feel the council is trying to divide them with this offer."

Mr Leech said the strike was "solid" and members would continue to fight for a pay grade increase.

The city council spokesman added that bosses wanted to make sure staff were at the level Unison says they are.

He said: "Unison say their members are already doing a job that merits a grade 6 salary and we simply wish to ensure that all staff are able to work at that level. We have already agreed with Unison that in the long term the number of caseworkers working at the grade 6 level should be 54 members of staff."

"Recent discussions have been about how we move towards that figure as well as support we would provide for staff looking to move up a grade."

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