

Glasgow workers strike against Labour council budget cuts

Steve James

21 August 1998

The collapse of the unofficial strike by Glasgow domestic workers is an initial victory for Glasgow City Council in its escalating war on the jobs and services of council workers and the city's poorest and most vulnerable residents.

The unprecedented eight-day strike began on Monday August 3, after three UNISON members were suspended for refusing to assist in preparation for 'best value' re-organisation of home-help provision. Many workers view the re-organisation as a form of privatisation, or at least a new form of 'tendering', whereby council services have to compete with private service providers. The three workers, a clerical assistant and two home-helps, were adhering to a union decision of the Glasgow UNISON branch to refuse all demands from management for strategic information relating to planned cuts. In implementing the suspension the council deliberately broke long-established procedures.

The 'best value' scheme is intended to save around £1.5 million by reducing 21 departments to 12. Workers are concerned that many jobs will go and that the provision of care to elderly and those in residential homes or in their own home will be seriously affected. Many old people rely on a regular home-help as a source of daily practical assistance, friendship and vital human contact.

The cuts and re-organisation are part of the City Council's intended £47 million budget savings, which will continue the destruction of services. Over the last few years, Glasgow City Council has closed swimming pools, advice projects, old people's homes, slashed projects for drug users and cut museum opening hours. Such economies do not apply to leading council officials who have ostentatiously enjoyed expenses-paid junkets and funded expensive legal disputes.

Following news of the suspensions, 1,200 workers

spontaneously walked out, and a rally was held attended by 2,000 workers. By Thursday August 6, the strike had spread to involve nearly 2,000 social work staff, day-care and residential workers, and drugs project staff. Strikers picketed the India Street headquarters of the Social Work Department and an area office in the Anniesland district of the city. Courts and the juvenile legal system in Glasgow were also paralysed.

In response, the strikers were subject to a concerted offensive by the City Council, the Scottish press, the courts, and the trade unions.

The City Council sent letters to every worker implying that their jobs were under threat if they continued their action. Newspaper adverts carried the same message. Workers were phoned at home by council officials and warned that they could lose their jobs if they did not return to work. Simultaneously, the Labour council under Frank McAveety threatened to use the Tory anti-union laws to seize UNISON's assets. UNISON is the largest union in Britain, with around 1.5 million members, mainly public service workers.

The *Scotsman* newspaper led a campaign against the social workers. A column railed against an 'unprofessional' strike by 'highly salaried people, trained at public expense to provide a public service.' The tabloid press targeted the political affiliations of the leading shop stewards. Roddy Slorach, UNISON convenor and a member of the Socialist Workers Party was witchhunted as 'Red Roddy.'

On Friday August 7, the City Council were granted an 'interim interdict' which banned UNISON from 'inciting, procuring, authorising, encouraging, organising, or assisting in any manner whatsoever employees of the petition [Glasgow City Council] from continuing to refuse to work without the support of a

ballot.' The interdict also named eight UNISON stewards including Slorach.

Within hours of the interdict, UNISON joined the attack on the social workers. The national leadership under Rodney Bickerstaffe publicly repudiated the strike and instructed its members to return to work. A local official, David Stevenson, told the court, 'The union has not endorsed the strike. They have not called a ballot, their involvement has been to seek resolution. The union's point of view is that this is an unofficial action.'

Workers initially defied the national and branch leadership's instructions, but under enormous pressure from all sides eventually voted by 3 to 1 at a mass meeting to return to work.

Slorach himself may face legal and disciplinary action because his action in speaking to the press over the weekend and leading a demonstration from a mass meeting to George Square was itself in breach on the interdict. This is unprecedented and an indication of the measures the Blair government and its supporters are considering using against any group of workers who challenge the anti-union laws.

Immediately on hearing of the strike's conclusion, the *Scotsman* lavished praise on McAveety for 'standing his ground in the face of intimidation.' The editorial went on to threaten more media abuse if workers take more action. 'If they do strike, then they will deserve the contempt and derision that will surely come their way.'

The end of the strike was the signal for a new two-pronged attack on social provision and council workers.

The City Council announced on August 14 that they intend to sell off the entire city's stock of over 100,000 houses and flats. Valued at between £20 and £50 million, ownership would be transferred to a finance holding company which would have to attract investment to finance maintenance and repairs. This could only be achieved by increasing rents and cutting maintenance workers jobs. Similar plans are being considered by seven other Scottish Local Authorities.

Of 600 low-paid caretakers and concierges in the city's high-rise flats, 100 have already been served with 90-day notices to quit their rent-free accommodation, or start paying rent. The move would save £370,000. The concierges held a ballot on strike action on August 10 but their union, the GMB, kept the dispute separate from the domestic workers strike and instead

encouraged the council to make cuts 'through tightening running costs.'

On August 17, 7,000 Glasgow council workers received warning letters informing them that around £720,000 of unpaid Poll Tax bills will be deducted from their pay packets. Dating from between 1989 and 1993, the debts are part of between £130 and £500 million of Poll Tax debts throughout Scotland. They were run up during the mass opposition to the Poll Tax, which at one point saw several million people across Britain refusing to pay.

See Also:

Attack on Scottish local government workers exposes factional struggle in Labour Party
[31 July 1998]



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact