

Britain: Leeds refuse workers strike against pay cuts

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Six hundred workers employed in refuse collection, street cleansing and waste management in Leeds have been on all-out strike since September 7. They are protesting against the plans of Leeds City Council to cut their wages by up to £6,000 a year on the spurious pretext of an “equality” re-grading scheme. Pickets have been posted at all council cleansing depots and a mass meeting of strikers on September 10 voted unanimously to continue with the strike until the council withdraws the cuts.

At the Cross Green depot one of the pickets told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We have had a lot of support from the public. This scenario is like Thatcher’s attack on the miners in 1984-85. If they can beat us they will go through the rest of the council like a dose of salts. Yesterday a worker from St. James Hospital across the road came to the picket and said they were watching what happens to us because if we get beat they will expect the same.”

Another striker said, “The council says we have to take a pay cut so lower paid workers, especially women workers, can get an increase. Women workers have been underpaid for years, and they should have their pay increased, but not at the expense of their fellow workers.”

After a recent lobby of the council, another striker said, “We are talking about life changing money here, our very survival depends on it. Our mortgages are based on current earnings. If we lose this strike, I will lose my house.

“The cuts will be made in 18 months. They are on the horizon right now, and they won’t go away. I have searched the Internet to find out what it is all about. I think the unions should never have accepted the deal in the first place.

“I have talked to some of the women workers who are the so-called ‘winners,’ like cleaners and dinner ladies. All of them have said that their wage has not gone up as

much as they expected. In some cases it is only a matter of a few pence.

“We have no objection to women getting equal pay. But why should we pay for it with a massive pay cut?”

Dave, another striker, said, “I am a driver and I am not due to lose money. But I am out on strike to support the rest of the lads because, even though my earnings may increase under this scheme because of enhancements, my basic hourly rate has been cut by a pound an hour and it wasn’t the greatest wage to start with. If this strike is lost they will take away everything. I accepted lower earnings when I started working for the council because it was a secure job, with a pension—but not now.”

The re-grading scheme was tabled by the Leeds Council in April 2007 in response to government legislation calling for the equalisation of payment for “work of equal value.” Equal pay legislation was passed more than 30 years ago, in 1975. But the union bureaucracy did nothing to secure implementation, and so individual workers, (mainly women), employed no-win no-fee solicitors to take their cases through employment tribunals to the High Court.

One woman, Rosaline Wilson, was awarded £32,000. She said that her case was opposed by her own union, which said “we were rocking the boat. They told us they would sort it, that we’d lose our jobs [if we went ahead], but they never did sort it out.”

Many other women have won settlements of thousands of pounds in back pay. In April this year there were 30,000 cases going through the courts in Scotland alone. As a result, a substantial amount of case law has been established and local authorities all over the UK realised that they had to take action to stem the rising tide of claims.

In 1997 a national Single Status Agreement (SSA) was negotiated between local authorities and the GMB, UNISON and the TGWU trade unions. UNISON claimed

it was ground breaking because “it placed the principles of equal value at the heart of the new grading structure, through equal pay based on jointly agreed job evaluation.”

In fact it was a far cry from the original legislation that had resulted in some women workers achieving genuine equal pay. The SSA opened the door for local authorities to attack rates of pay and working conditions in the name of “equalisation.” Councils insisted that the scheme had to be almost “cost neutral”: Increased pay for one had to be met from a pay cut for another. Also payment of back pay (in Leeds this would be from April 1, 2007) would vitiate any claims that were being processed through Employment Tribunals which could go back six years and amount to substantial sums. In this way the councils could save tens of millions of pounds.

UNISON was complicit in this process of levelling down. Its “negotiating strategy and guidance for local UNISON negotiators” states that although “In negotiations the starting point should be to ‘equalise up’ the pay structures so that there are no financial losers...in practice this will often be difficult to achieve.” Point 16 states that UNISON negotiators should seek to secure [a pay line] that results in as many gainers *and as few losers as possible*” (emphasis added).

The UNISON document states, “The union will strive to protect the interests of those members who may lose out as a result of the implementation of the new pay structure.

“The idea behind pay protection is to ease the pain of transition, not to maintain enhanced pay for an indefinite period,” it adds. It then specifies, “There should be no protection in place for new employees.”

In Leeds there is already a two-tier wage system because bin men’s wage rates are protected for three years, but new starters have been set on at the reduced rates.

Job evaluation exercises, with the full participation of the unions, have been conducted all over the country and jobs of men and women have been slotted into different pay scales on the basis of “equal value.” There have been disputes in towns and cities, from Brighton on the south coast to Aberdeen in the north of Scotland. Many different jobs have been affected. In Coventry, for example, benefit advisors and environmental officers as well as clerical staff, care assistants, receptionist/telephonists, library assistants and nursery nurses have all been downgraded.

As regards equal pay, the SSA has resulted in different authorities paying different amounts for the same job. For

example, a cleaner’s basic pay in Southampton is £10,872, in Hull it is £11,286 and in Rushmoor £12,018.

In Leeds 22,000 jobs have so far been evaluated out of a total of 33,000. Of these 2,500 workers are described as “losers.” The 600 bin men have been the worst affected

The detailed proposals were tabled 18 months ago. One-day protest strikes were organised by the GMB in April and May. UNISON balloted all Leeds council workers, most of whom didn’t realise that when they voted to accept the agreement as the best available, it would mean wage cuts for their fellow workers.

In October last year, the council issued an ultimatum threatening to sack any worker who did not sign the new agreement within 90 days. Officials of all the unions involved told the workers they had no alternative but to sign. A month ago the unions were forced to break off negotiations and organise a strike ballot amongst bin men, which was strongly endorsed.

The strike is almost 100 percent solid, with few workers crossing picket lines. But the council is employing contract workers as scab labour.

Wages and conditions have already been decimated in the private sector, with unions agreeing to wage cuts, attacks on working conditions and holiday entitlements. Both the Labour government and the opposition are agreed on the necessity for massive cuts in public spending to pay for the handouts to the bankers. That means wage cuts, speed-ups, redundancies and attacks on pension entitlements on an unprecedented scale. The SSA establishes the employers’ right to change job descriptions, conditions and rates of pay at will, helping to open up the public sector to attack.

The unions locally have been forced to act due to the massive groundswell of opposition to the pay cut, but the bureaucracy will seek a rotten compromise in the end. And they will continue to collaborate with the implementation of whatever pay cuts they can get other workers to accept, in Leeds and nationally. If the strike is to be successful, then there must be an appeal over the heads of the union tops for solidarity action throughout Leeds and the preparation of coordinated national action through the creation of new organisations of the rank and file.



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