

Britain: Leeds refuse strike enters fourth week

Our reporter
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The strike by 600 workers employed in refuse collection, street cleaning and waste management in Leeds has entered its fourth week.

Beginning on September 7, the refuse workers, or bin men, are protesting against Leeds City Council's cutting their wages by up to £6,000 a year on the spurious pretext of an "equality" re-grading scheme. The trade unions involved, including Unison and the GMB, are reported to be in "informal talks" aimed at ending the action.

Should this happen, it would be a cave-in to the Liberal Democrat-Conservative council, which has threatened to exclude the union bureaucracy from taking part in a privatization tender in 2011.

Council leader Richard Brett threatened to privatise the service at last month's Liberal Democrat conference, with a council official telling the BBC that "the prospect of an in-house bid is shot" as a result of the strike.

Brett said, "We may be in a sense being pushed by this action into more seriously considering the very thing that the strikers say they don't want—the outsourcing of the service, the privatising of the service."

Tony Pearson of Unison called the threat "an absolutely appalling comment, especially in the middle of this dispute," but his complaint was not against privatization but the fact that "the council has already decided that it will not allow an in-house bid."

At least 20 vehicles from a private firm have been hired to break the strike. Last week, 27 bin wagons were collecting in Leeds, 20 of them from a private firm and seven council vehicles, Brett said. The normal number is 37 each day.

Despite this strike-breaking, the unions entered talks

with the council. Pearson expressed hope that formal discussions would bring the dispute to an end.

The discussions came as it has been announced that refuse workers in nearby Bradford face an identical attack to their colleagues in Leeds. The GMB has revealed to the *Yorkshire Post* that "efforts were ongoing to avoid the type of action which is gripping Leeds," after "Bradford Council had told bin men it wanted to make savings which could see some workers lose £5,000 a year, a pay cut comparable to that faced in Leeds."

GMB regional spokesman Steve Morris downplayed the threat, stating, "We had talks this morning with council officers which seemed fairly positive. But things may change. We had already had several meetings and we will have two meetings a week going forward. We have not drawn a line in the sand yet, but you never know."

The same excuse for wage cuts is being advanced, with refuse workers and several other categories affected. Becky Hellard, Bradford Council's strategic director of corporate services, said that "approximately 600 employees" would be offered amended contracts "to conform with Single Status, a national agreement reached between unions and employers which councils everywhere must implement."

"We have been working with the trade unions and negotiations are progressing well," she said.

In Sheffield, South Yorkshire, the already privatized refuse collection service could be hit by strikes after it emerged that contractor Veolia, which employs 180 bin men, had different rates of pay for workers carrying out the same duties. Those employed originally by the council are given a higher rate of pay than those hired after privatization. Veolia took over refuse collections in Sheffield in 2001 and has a 35-year contract. A

union poll indicated 89 percent support for industrial action. But Sheffield officer Peter Davis promised the media: “We’ll do everything we can to avoid industrial action and reach a settlement.”

The Single Status pay restructuring affects broad layers of Sheffield Council employees. This week Unison and the GMB held separate meetings on plans for a new pay structure that would mean wage cuts for some of the lowest paid employees, including care assistants and Street Force workers.

Nearly a fifth of council workers (2,500) could face pay cuts. But all that the unions have agreed is to organize “indicative” ballots on whether to take action. The ballots are organized with the express intention of preventing united strike action. The ballot papers will be colour-coded so that the union can call out only those areas where there is an overwhelming vote for action. That too would require the organization of a strike ballot.

Far from being the targeted “guerrilla” strike by the “more militant sections of the workforce” described by Unison regional officer Kevin Osborne, this is a strategy to contain militancy and sow divisions. The same device was used in Leeds to isolate the bin men.

Unison officers have said that strike action would probably not take place until next year, in the run-up to the local elections in May. Next week the 13,500 council workers will receive letters telling them whether they are among those who will have their pay cut. Unison is only demanding that those facing pay cuts are kept on the current grade for two years and are not opposing re-grading as such.

In a related development, South Yorkshire members of the Fire Brigades Union have voted by a five-to-one majority for a strike over shift changes that will disrupt family life. The 744 fire fighters have accused the fire authority of preparing to sack them all and re-employ them on new contracts in the New Year.

Up and down the UK, similar attacks are being implemented by local councils dominated by all the various political parties.

In Doncaster, South Yorkshire, unions have warned that a 3 percent council tax cut proposed by right-wing Mayor Peter Davies could threaten thousands of jobs and lead to a collapse in some services. Davies is seeking to make cuts of 10 to 20 percent across the board.

In Edinburgh, Scotland, a fifth of council workers (3,800) face losing their jobs after councillors voted to implement “radical” plans to outsource and privatize services. Those threatened include more than 1,000 environmental workers, such as bin men and gardeners, as well as nearly 1,200 corporate services staff.

In every instance the trade unions have worked to prevent action taking place or, when this is not possible, to isolate the workers involved and ensure a speedy end to the dispute at their members’ expense.

It is essential that the necessary fight against the slash-and-burn policies being imposed is waged by independent organizations controlled by the rank-and-file and against the trade union apparatuses, which work as barely concealed allies of the government and the employers.



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