Leeds refuse workers vote to continue strike

SEP (Britain) warns against sellout by union leadership

Our reporter
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At a mass meeting of striking refuse workers in Leeds yesterday, the 300 strikers present voted to continue their five-week strike against attempts to slash wages by up to £6,000 a year. The meeting came after two days of negotiations were suspended for a day to "think things through."

Tony Pearson, Unison regional organiser, in a statement to the press, said negotiations on Thursday had ended with some positive talks, and negotiations would continue that afternoon. Both sides had "engaged in productive negotiations," he added. Leeds Council leader Richard Brett echoed Pearson's view saying, "These exploratory talks appear to be going well and that is good news."

Speaking at the union meeting before talks were about to resume, Paul Kenny, general secretary of the GMB, demagogically told the assembled workers to expect a long fight, right up to Christmas if that is what it took. The unions planned to bring in support from other workers in public services for demonstrations in Leeds, he said, but there was no discussion of broadening the dispute to other sections of workers. Advice was given by a member of Unison's National Executive Committee for "individual" strikers to visit Unison branches to raise money.

No report back from the negotiation meetings was made to the strikers, and no questions from the floor were allowed.

After the meeting, strikers expressed concern that not enough was being done to broaden the dispute to other sections of the public services. One striker said, "We need a great big strike—one almighty struggle. Leeds is getting all the publicity at present, but it affects everyone. The other councils are looking at Leeds to see what happens. The employers can make cuts in any jobs, education, social services and private industry as well."

Another striker told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter, "I'm convinced that the union is in cahoots with the employer. In the meeting this morning they told us nothing. They didn't allow questions, and how could we ask questions when we weren't told anything about the negotiations. I've read your leaflet, and it sounds right to me."

The leaflet distributed by members of the Socialist Equality Party at the meeting is reproduced below.

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The five-week strike by Leeds refuse workers is in danger of being sold out. Ongoing negotiations between the trade unions and council management are discussing pay cuts of between £3,000 and £6,000, as well as "efficiency improvements," according to Council leader Richard Brett.

The unions involved, the GMB and Unison, will seize on any offer other than the headline £6,000 pay cut and some meaningless "guarantees" to proclaim a victory and call off the strike. If they succeed, whatever is agreed will only be the start of the cuts faced by refuse collectors and the rest of Leeds council workforce. Brett has already declared that refuse collection is due to be privatised in just over a year's time.

More than anything, the trade union leaders want the strike out of the way. Their over-riding concern is to prevent the Leeds dispute feeding into similar action by council workers throughout Yorkshire and nationally.

The collusion of the unions with the local authorities explains the muted campaign they are putting up in Leeds. Every council worker knows the unions have directed their support towards collecting money from local branches and organising a pop concert, while

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refusing even to call out other council workers in Leeds.

A similar dispute is brewing in Bradford, a town less than seven miles from Leeds. The unions there have been in lengthy negotiation with the council over similar wage cuts of up to £5,000, affecting 600 refuse-related workers. But there has been no action taken to bring together both sets of workers.

In Sheffield, South Yorkshire, the privatized refuse collection service could be hit by strikes after it emerged that contractor Veolia has different rates of pay for workers carrying out the same duties. The Single Status pay restructuring affects broad layers of Sheffield Council employees.

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 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 proper strike ballot.

Far from being a targeted "guerrilla" strike, this is a strategy to contain militancy and sow divisions, just as has been done with Leeds 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.

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

The trade union bureaucrats cannot be trusted. But the Socialist Workers Party is calling on workers to trust them and to do so absolutely and unconditionally. Its leaflet described talks between the unions and the council as Brett having been forced to eat "humble pie." They have proclaimed the strike as a "magnificent show of unity" that has all but won already, without even seeing what has been proposed by the council or accepted by the unions. Instead, they declare "All power to the negotiators!"

Workers should recall that the Communist Party similarly demanded "All power to the TUC General Council!" during the 1926 General Strike, which the TUC sold out after ten days.

The necessary fight against the slash-and-burn policies being imposed in Leeds and throughout the country must be waged by independent organizations controlled by the rank-and-file and against the trade union apparatuses, who work as barely concealed allies of the government and the employers.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on the Leeds refuse workers to build such independent rank-and-file committees. The struggle must be taken out to the rest of the Leeds council workforce in defiance of the anti-union laws and the efforts to isolate the strike by the union tops. Above all, Leeds workers must contact and seek united action with other council workers across Britain.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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