

Britain: Leeds refuse workers vote to continue strike

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At a mass meeting on October 21, striking Leeds refuse workers voted by a massive 92 percent majority to reject the “final offer” from Leeds City Council and continue their seven-week strike. The strike began on September 7 in opposition to the council’s plans to cut the pay of bin men by up to £6,000 a year under the Single Status Agreement.

The council offer includes a substantial cut in basic pay, reorganisation of collection routes, the introduction of productivity pay for loaders, the effective ending of the present system of “task and finish,” the introduction of “zoning” and the reduction of sickness and pension entitlements.

On October 14, after days of negotiations, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* reported that the GMB and Unison negotiators were prepared to accept most aspects of the council’s “final offer.” The paper stated, “The YEP understands that the unions have accepted, in principal, the reorganisation of routes and shift pattern changes, tied to the payment of bonuses.” The only sticking point was that they had “so far not agreed to link those agreements with absenteeism rates.”

Whether the report was true or not, when the offer was put to the shop stewards on October 16, it was rejected. At the mass meeting held five days later, the platform then recommended that the offer be rejected.

Leeds City Council said the offer was conditional on union agreement to review collection routes and “increase productivity.” This included a bonus scheme based on increasing the task of bin-loaders by 15 percent, from 190 properties an hour to 220, a target that workers insist is unattainable. As well as the new speed targets, litter-bin vehicle drivers would lose £1,000 a year, despite having to work weekends.

A Unison press statement said, “Failure to meet these

[targets] would automatically cost workers £4,500 a year and the strain of having to attempt it could seriously affect their health.”

The council proposed a small concession to wagon drivers, but they understood that this was an attempt to break the strike. Two female wagon drivers told our reporters, “The only possibility of getting anywhere near the targets would be under perfect conditions regarding weather, traffic, and the conditions of the wagons, half of which are knackered. They break down all the time. This is supposed to be a good deal for the drivers, but it’s rubbish.”

Regarding the proposal to organise work in zones for bonus purposes, another worker said, “I’ve heard they want four wagons per sector. If one wagon fails, they all fail. To save money, they can cut the number of crews to two and redeploy the others to a lower-paying job.”

“They have already set the work levels too high.... The true count is the bin count, and the council doesn’t even know how many bins there are. Some properties have two, three or even four bins.”

Both the GMB and Unison are looking for a way to end the strike. Immediately after the mass meeting, Desiree Risebury, GMB regional organiser, told the BBC, “From the start we have always said we were prepared to work longer to achieve productivity improvements to the service but it is just physically impossible for them to work faster.”

Tony Pearson, regional organiser for Unison, told BBC *Look North*, “The union would be looking to other mechanisms to settle the strike, including ACAS and the Local Government Joint Provincial Council.”

Before the mass meeting, a leaflet from the Socialist Equality Party was distributed to the strikers, many of whom read it carefully as they waited for admittance to

the meeting room.

The leaflet called for the rejection of the deal, but stressed that “this is only the starting point. Refuse workers must draw the necessary lesson from their experience during this dispute—that the GMB and Unison do not act in the interest of their members but those of management.”

The leaflet noted that “The strike developed in Leeds because refuse workers were being faced with substantial wage cuts of up to £6,000. But since it began the unions have refused to bring out other sections of workers in solidarity with the strikers. This is despite the fact that a report in the *Yorkshire Post* on October 14 headlined the fact that the Leeds Council is planning to slash its workforce by a fifth over the next five years.”

The leaflet explained, “In addition, enormous focus has been placed on the fact that the Leeds City Council is led by a coalition of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives in order to reinforce the spurious claim that Labour is somehow different in its attitude to cuts.” In reality, “Tens of thousands of jobs are even now being slashed throughout the public sector, whether local authorities are Liberal Democrat, Labour or Tory.”

“Official support by the trade unions for the Leeds refuse strike is being used to conceal their refusal to organise opposition to similar attacks taking place nationally and to justify their continued alliance with a Labour government that is pledged to carry out savage cuts,” the SEP stated. “That is the only reason why hardship funds have been made available, amid declarations that Leeds cleansing workers will stay out ‘until Christmas if necessary.’ “

“As the proposed deal shows, behind all the rhetoric of ‘digging in,’ the unions are working to bring an end to the dispute on terms favourable to the long-term objectives of the council.

“The strike must be immediately taken out of the hands of the unions by setting up a rank-and-file strike committee that will seek combined industrial action by workers throughout Leeds and nationally. But this must be bound up with the recognition that workers are involved in a political struggle.

“The government has handed over billions of pounds in taxpayers’ money to shore-up the ill-gotten gains of the super-rich, whose financial shenanigans threatened the collapse of the banking system. While the banks are now back to business as usual, once again paying out huge bonuses out of state funds, the powers-that-be are using the massive public debt incurred to slash wages and

working conditions won over decades of struggle.

“Whether in the post, fire service, higher education or any other sector of the economy, all workers face the same attacks. Whatever the immediate outcome of the refuse dispute in Leeds, this is only the beginning.

“On Monday, the Confederation of British Industry called on the government to speed up its plans to ‘balance’ public finances, and to cut an additional £120 billion out of current spending plans over the next six years or so.

“Calling for a ‘radical re-design of the way public services are delivered,’ it stressed this meant ‘introducing new technology and competition, eliminating waste and inefficiency, and tackling unaffordable pensions and pay head on.’ The aim is to rationalise the public sector and then privatise whatever remains.”

The SEP insisted that “Under conditions of a global economic crisis that has revealed the complete failure of capitalism, the necessary defence of jobs, wages and working conditions can only be carried through on the basis of a socialist perspective.

“Economic and political power must be taken out of the hands of the financial aristocracy and society completely reorganised under the democratic control of working people according to social need, not private profit. The billions squandered on the super-rich should be confiscated and used to provide decent public services and to safeguard the living standards of working people.

“This can only be realised in a struggle against the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy. Labour is a right-wing party of big business, in no way dissimilar to the Conservatives. Workers need their own party, a socialist party.”



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