

Savage cuts by UK local authorities spearheaded by Labour

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Local authorities throughout Britain are currently voting on budgets for the coming year and imposing cuts of tens of millions of pounds in public spending.

As part of the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government's £83 billion austerity programme, council spending has been cut by 28 percent over the next four years. Councils across the official political spectrum are not only passing these cuts onto the local population but also using them to restructure jobs, wages and conditions.

A Channel 4 News report found that some local authorities in England and Wales are cutting pay and allowances for some of their staff by as much as 40 percent, arguing it is necessary to save jobs and services. This comes under conditions in which public sector workers are already subject to a two-year pay freeze. In the next few weeks, the Hutton Inquiry into public sector pensions is expected to recommend that workers must pay up to 50 percent more into their pensions.

In Conservative-led Blackpool, local authority workers are to take a four-day unpaid holiday annually—the equivalent of a 1 percent pay cut. Tory-run Southampton council is pushing for a 5.5 percent pay cut. The council has said that if the workers will not accept the pay cut, they will be sacked and have to reapply for their jobs. Tory-led Dorset County Council is forcing 12 days' unpaid leave—equivalent to a 5 percent pay cut—and laying off 500 after it agreed to budget cuts of £31 million.

England's largest authority, Birmingham City Council, has agreed to slash £212 million in the next financial year leading to the loss of 2,450 jobs. All remaining staff at the Conservative-Liberal Democrat-led council face pay freezes or cuts, including ending overtime pay for night and weekend work.

At the all-party coalition Sefton council, Merseyside, workers at a social care provider have been told their pay will be cut by one-quarter, in addition to sweeping changes to their employment contracts. Some 500 workers at Sefton

New Directions, which provides for vulnerable and disabled adults, have been told to take a 26 percent pay cut or lose their jobs.

Cumbria County Council is also to cut the pay of its 3,500 teaching assistants by a quarter. Full-time salaries for teaching assistants are to fall from £14,733 to £11,143, senior teaching assistants from £16,830 to £11,556, higher-level teaching assistants from £19,126 to £15,072, and principal teaching assistants from £21,519 to £20,184.

Some of the largest cuts are being made by Labour-controlled councils, which are seeking to justify their attacks by laying the blame wholly on central government.

Liverpool council has agreed to £91 million in cuts, with 1,500 job losses over the next three years. This is in addition to 600 lost over the last months. Labour did not want to make the cuts, he claimed, blaming the coalition governments.

This is just a smokescreen for Labour's refusal to put up any opposition to the government's austerity measures, which they support in principle. Council leader Joe Anderson hit out at the opposition proposals for alternative measures, saying they were living in a "fantasy land".

Nationally, Labour-controlled authorities have issued on average 745 job "at-risk" notifications to their workforce.

The GMB union found that a total of 29,812 jobs are threatened in the North West region of England alone. In Manchester, the council has voted through cuts of £109 million in what is the fourth most deprived local authority area in the country. This includes the loss of 2,000 jobs (17 percent of the council workforce), the loss or privatisation of 36 Sure Start children's centres, the closure of five libraries and at least one swimming pool, the closure of all public toilets except one, redundancies in refuse services and in the availability of free street car parking. The council intends to cut a further £170 million in spending next year.

In adjacent Salford, the council voted through cuts of £42 million on March 2, with 600 jobs to go, while Wigan is cutting spending by £47 million, with up to 820 jobs threatened.

Labour is in control, in coalition with two Green Party councillors, at Leeds City Council in West Yorkshire. The council is imposing cuts of £90 million, including 3,000 jobs losses. A total of over £150 million is to be cut over four years. Mental health provision is to be cut, leisure centres and libraries closed.

In London, as of March 1, some 6,340 job losses among 26 of London's 32 boroughs had been announced. Three of the London boroughs under Labour control announced cuts of £100 million to be made over the next three years. Newham will cut £47 million this year (16.4 percent of its budget) and £100 million over three years. Camden is to cut up to £100 million and Brent, £100 million, including 400 job losses on top of 350 already announced.

The list goes on. While the Labour leader Ed Miliband criticises the coalition government for implementing its austerity measures too rapidly, not only are Labour-controlled councils pushing the measures through, they are clamping down on any opposition.

In Hackney, which is making £44 million cuts, police and security were called to clear protesters from the gallery at the meeting where Labour councillors pushed through the budget. In Islington, also Labour-controlled, police were called to physically remove those protesting at plans to cut £52 million next financial year and a further £50 million over the following three years. The council met in secret session to agree the budget.

Prior to the general election, Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling stated that cuts that would be implemented under any incoming Labour government would be "tougher and deeper" than those implemented by the hated Margaret Thatcher Conservative government of the 1980s. This was necessary in order to foot the bill for the more than £1 trillion that was robbed from the public purse by the Labour government and handed over to the banks and super-rich following the 2008 financial crash.

Labour, like the coalition government, is relying on the trade unions to help impose its cutbacks. In Blackpool, council leader Peter Callow praised trade union assistance in helping convince staff to accept pay cuts. At Blackburn with Darwen Council, Lancashire, the Unison representative said that the announced spending cuts of £29 million were necessary to avoid further redundancies. Gareth Roscoe said,

"There are obviously some people who aren't happy. But most would rather preserve their jobs."

In instances where workers have been threatened with the sack if they do not accept new pay and conditions, the unions have refused to call strike action. By leaving it at the level of individual "choice", they aim to preserve their relations with the local authorities—especially Labour-run councils—while washing their hands of any responsibility for the attacks on their members.

The position was summed up by Unison National Executive Committee member Roger Bannister at a meeting on the government's cuts in Lancashire. Bannister made great play of the need for a fight to defend jobs and services, but his speech made clear that his union would not be the one organising it. If workers were "prepared to take that step" of strike action, they would "get the full support of other workers." Later, he said he had been referring to "discontinuous days" of action, but that any such step would be down to individual councils.

This gives the measure to the character of the upcoming Trades Union Congress (TUC) national demonstration on March 26. While supposedly aimed against the cuts, the trade union bureaucracy is collaborating with them. Meanwhile, the TUC has welcomed the decision of Miliband—the political representative of many of those councils now imposing the cuts—to address the rally.

To fight the cuts, everything depends on working people breaking from the Labour Party and trade unions and building new democratic organisations of struggle. The Socialist Equality Party is calling for the formation of popular committees of action in the workplace based on uniting all sections of the working class—the employed and unemployed, students, those trapped in unions and those who are not union members.



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