

Wage cuts and job losses at UK's Southampton council

Paul Mitchell
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The “anti-cuts strategy” pursued by the unions has been a disaster for workers at Southampton city council and a dire warning to others involved in the struggle to protect services, jobs and wages.

Months after the Conservative-controlled Southampton council first made clear the extent of its planned budget cuts, all but 17 of the council's 4,627 employees have signed new contracts on worse conditions under threat of being sacked.

Following Wednesday's demonstration outside city hall by 1,000 council workers, some of whom have been on strike this week, council leader Royston Smith said, “I acknowledge and understand people's right to demonstrate. But the terms and conditions have now been signed and more than 99 percent of staff have signed up and are back at work. It's time we tried to get back to work and put this behind us”.

The council has spearheaded the drive to impose the Conservative/Liberal-Democratic government's £83 billion austerity programme, which will lead to an estimated 28 percent cut in council spending over the next four years. Local Authorities across the official political spectrum are restructuring jobs, wages and conditions, cutting services or hiving them off to the private sector or “volunteers”.

Southampton Council became the first to carry out its threat to “fire and rehire” workers on lower pay rates. It set a deadline of July 11 for new contracts to be signed, in which those earning over £17,500 will have their pay cut by 5.4 percent and there will be a freeze on previously agreed wage increases and cuts to other terms and conditions. In addition, 250 council jobs will be lost—a

prelude, a leaked council report indicates, to a quarter of all workers losing their jobs over the next three years.

Others authorities are following events in Southampton very closely and are threatening to follow suit. Shropshire County Council recently told its 6,500 employees that they will be dismissed on September 30 and only rehired the next day if they agree to a 5.4 percent pay cut.

Union leaders are well aware of the significance of the attack taking place in Southampton. Unite regional officer Ian Woodland declared, “The leadership of this council is misusing this office to bully working men and women out of their jobs. If [Smith] gets away with this, Tory councils across the country will seek to do the same”.

The unions promised a new “strategic campaign”, aimed at putting pressure on the council to “stop doing George Osborne's bidding and start standing up for the workers and services of Southampton”.

Woodland said, “The unions are looking at a strategic campaign where we are using selective action ... It is not just bringing everyone out, which is the old-fashioned view, but bringing out key workers that will have an effect on the state nationally and locally. We have shown how it can be done locally”.

“The tactics we are developing here will be used elsewhere”, added Unison's Southampton branch secretary, Mike Tucker.

Rather than uniting all sections of workers against the generalised assault on jobs, wages and living standards, resistance has instead been divided along sectional lines. Street cleaners, refuse collectors, librarians, traffic wardens and toll bridge workers have taken the brunt of

strike action at different times over the last eight weeks. This week some 400 workers have been on strike, with 230 building maintenance workers joining them on Wednesday.

Professing a combined membership of 2.7 million with huge material and financial resources, the unions have allowed several thousand workers backed by a large proportion of the local population to be “bullied” by a small group of Conservative councillors into signing new contracts.

Unison Deputy General Secretary Keith Sonnet blustered, “This fight is far from over. We will continue to take action against Southampton Council’s devastating cuts”.

But Sonnet’s words are so much hot air. The union is looking to wind down further industrial action. In its place, “mass legal claims for unfair dismissal” are being promoted alongside legal action claiming the council failed to consult. A preliminary employment tribunal hearing will be held on August 5, but it will take months if not years to process the claims.

The unions are also calling for a campaign to get Labour councillors elected in next year’s local elections—“to defend Council jobs, services and our working conditions against the politically motivated actions by the Conservatives at a local and national level”.

In reality, Southampton Labour group leader Richard Williams has already condemned the strikes and declared that 1,500 jobs need to go “to balance the books”. The same picture is repeated nationally, with Labour-controlled councils all making cuts.

The dispute in Southampton is further evidence that the Labour Party and trade unions no longer defend the most basic and immediate interests of working people and have openly aligned themselves with the demands of the corporations and financial elite. This is why the working class has until now been unable to mount an effective challenge to the coalition government and its austerity measures.

Over the last year, draconian austerity measures have been imposed across Europe and, in every case, the trade unions have acted to restrict the class struggle and

facilitate the attacks demanded by the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. In some of the worst cases, these governments are nominally social democratic like Labour, such as PASOK in Greece.

The unions are organisations run by well-paid careerists who are hostile to workers’ interests. All they care about is preserving their comfortable relations with the employers and the government—built up over decades—by suppressing any effective fight-back.

This week’s announcement that Unite, Unison and the GMB have made “industry first” agreement with Sodexo, a company long identified as anti-union and with a workforce on poor pay, underscores this. Sodexo is one of the companies likely to benefit from the privatisation of council services and the unions want to make sure they have a piece of the action.

Unison’s General Secretary Dave Prentis explained, “This agreement is a welcome demonstration of the commitment on both sides to positive, partnership working. Increasing numbers of workers providing public services are now employed by private companies. It’s only right that they should have the protection of a trade union. We look forward to working with Sodexo for the benefit of these staff and the company”.

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 workplaces, 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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