

Britain: Lessons of the Southampton council strike

Tony Robson
6 September 2011

The 12-week series of rolling strikes by council workers employed by Southampton City Council (SCC) in England, against the imposition of fire and rehire contracts by the Conservative authority, has been hailed by the Unison and Unite trade unions as the example to be followed nationally in the fight against the cuts.

Unison and Unite have announced that the approach adopted in Southampton will be replicated for workers in the National Health Service against the Conservative/Liberal governments' attacks on public sector pensions.

The promotion of selective strike action is aimed at forestalling a general mobilisation of the working class against the coalition. That is why Ian Woodland, Unite's regional officer, told the *Guardian*, "It is not just bringing everyone out, which is the old fashioned view, but the bringing out key workers that will have an effect on the state."

Behind this rhetoric, Unison and Unite are suppressing all real opposition to the government to such a degree that the former head of the Confederation of British Industry, Richard Lambert, has praised Unison for exercising restraint.

What has been the outcome of the campaign organised by Unison and Unite in Southampton?

The Tory authority has implemented its pay cut of up to 5.5 percent following its ultimatum to the entire workforce of 4,600 to sign new contracts or accept dismissal. The unions have ensured that there has been no industrial action since August 14 other than a work to rule, while attempting to foist a revised version of the pay cuts on their members.

A mass meeting on August 10, attended by 600 council workers, voted to reject the repackaged pay cuts by a majority of 4 to 1. The aim of the revised offer was to sow divisions amongst the workforce, so that the bulk of the £6

million cut in the yearly wage bill went through.

To this end, the threshold for those taking a pay cut was raised from £17,500 to £21,500. Those above this threshold were offered a mere half-percent smaller pay cut than previously.

Qualified social workers were offered restoration of pay rates, which was denied to unqualified social workers and administration staff. The two-year pay freeze remained.

The Unison/Unite strike committee refused to make a recommendation on whether to accept or reject this divisive package. Since the meeting, the mandate to resume strike action has been sabotaged using the stipulations of the anti-union laws.

Unison Regional Secretary Phil Wood wrote to the Southampton District Branch on August 15 to claim that whereas, "Lawful Industrial action, as taken in Southampton, is protected for the first 12 weeks, taken from the first day of strike action ... after twelve weeks, (from Monday 15 August 2011), Southampton City Council could dismiss those taking industrial action."

The unions could in fact have easily organised a strike ballot to renew action prior to this 12-week limit. Instead the strike committee, which was scheduled to meet on August 23 to discuss the next steps, has simply declared that it is to hold consultative meetings with various sections of workers.

The winding down of the strike is being justified with the boast that, "By standing together we brought the city council back to the negotiating table with a new offer."

For the unions, the sole aim of industrial action is to safely dissipate the opposition of their members to the council,

while securing their own right to continue as an industrial police force on behalf of management. When the council first announced its plan to impose a 5 percent pay cut in November 2010, the unions sought to avert united strike action. In January this included suspending its indicative ballot of members to provide SCC with more time to make alternative proposals.

Unable to prevent a strike any longer, the unions then mooted their 12-week programme of rolling strikes. At the same time, with a deadline of July 11 set for the council workforce to accept the new contract or be dismissed, Unite and Unison instructed their members to sign. As a result, virtually the entire workforce had formally accepted the new contracts.

The unions have now told workers to place their faith in legal appeals for unfair dismissal and against the failure by SCC to properly consult. This attempt to present the courts as offering a means of defending workers' rights runs contrary to all experience of the working class over the past 30 years, in which repressive legislation has repeatedly been used to bolster the attacks of the corporate and financial elite. Meanwhile, the council has now let it be known that it intends to slash its workforce by 1,400, more than quarter.

The sabotage of Southampton council workers' struggle will provide a boost for councils throughout the country. Hampshire County Council is to shed 1,200 jobs and cut the pay of some of its lowest paid workers. Shropshire County Council has issued its 6,500 workforce dismissal notices to sign new contracts based upon a 5 percent pay cut by September 30. In Plymouth the council has derecognised Unison, following Unison's failure to sign up to attacks agreed to by Unite.

Nationally, the unions have restricted whatever limited strike action they organise to Tory-run authorities. But Labour-controlled authorities are carrying out no less ruthless attacks on jobs, conditions and critical social services. Last year Labour councils in Neath and Rhondda Cynon Taf in Wales issued dismissal notices to enforce new contracts involving pay freezes and reduction in allowances.

Locally, Unison and Unite have attempted to corral the opposition to the cuts in Southampton behind a campaign to get Labour elected in next years' local elections. But the strike was disowned by the leader of the Labour Group, Richard Williams, who stated, "I've been very clear to the unions. There will be redundancies. If there is a change of administration there will be less people working for the

council than today."

In response Unison Regional Organiser Andy Straker merely complained, "If this is what he is planning on doing I would have thought he would be trying to sit down with the unions, discussing how to make these cuts, rather than doing what the Tories are doing and telling us what is happening and expect us to accept it."

Once again, groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party have functioned as loyal adjuncts of the union bureaucracy, hailing the Southampton dispute as proof that the unions will fight the attacks waged on workers. Both the SWP and SP claimed that the decision of the mass meeting would be honoured. The Alliance for Workers Liberty group even cynically declared, "Whatever its outcome, the Southampton dispute has put the best of labour movement traditions—control of disputes by rank-and-file committees and mass meetings with democratic structures and real sovereign control—back on the agenda."

The only purpose of such lies is to maintain the control of the bureaucracy over the working class and to safeguard their own lucrative positions within the union apparatus.

The real lesson of Southampton is that workers must urgently break free of the stranglehold of the trade unions and the Labour Party, which are organisations of the ruling class, and strike out on the road of independent industrial and political struggle.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact