

Southampton council workers criticise union

Our reporters
10 October 2011

On October 6, more than 1,000 Southampton local authority workers struck against the pay and job cuts imposed by the Conservative-led council. Social workers, environmental health workers, refuse workers and other local authority workers took part. Hundreds joined the rally held in Guildhall Square in the city centre.

Mike told World Socialist Web Site reporters, “I think there should be more strike actions against the council’s way of treating its workforce. But at the same time, I feel that the Labour side of the council and the trade unions are downscaling it to a certain extent. They are doing what they want to do, rather than what the rank-and-file want to do.

“The council say that they’ve got no money. How can they find money to build a museum? And we did not create this crisis. Bankers started it. We, the people in this country, are expected to pay for that. I think the whole thing is wrong.”

An electrician said, “I have been working in this council for three years. We are forced to have a pay cut. We are having a pay freeze for a couple of years. It does not seem fair. The council say that these cuts are necessary to save public money, but the amount of money wasted in the council is disgusting. Different contractors are coming in. Useless projects are in progress. So many private companies are involved in working for the council. We don’t know what is going on. We don’t know whether we will be working in 12 months’ time.

“I think the strike action is very poor in safeguarding our jobs and conditions. The strike action should be more consolidated with all the unions. The unions, right from the very beginning, should have had all out strike actions, every one working together.”

Simon, an environmental health worker, said, “It is disgraceful to force workers to have a 5 to 5.5 percent pay cut, while the councillors are actually going to have

a pay rise. An independent remuneration panel says that councillors should have a reduction in their allowances from £12,500 to £7,500. They have got free parking, here at Guildhall Square, whereas front-line workers like social workers and environmental health workers who have a contracted obligation to have a car for work are charged £39 a month.

“Government shouldn’t be cutting front line services. They should be taking more money from the bankers and wealthy who don’t pay enough. It is completely wrong to bail out banks from taxpayers’ money and impose the austerity burden on the workers. Fred Goodwin of Royal Bank of Scotland took early retirement and I think he is getting a half million pounds-a-year pension. Why does he get that after he buggered up the banking system?”

Richard Brown, a crew coordinator on a safer community team, said, “As a result of this pay cut I have to cut back on everything. On the other hand, my fuel bills have increased by 20 percent. So I am paying more on electric, more on gas and I can barely afford to fill up my car.

“The council seems to be just taking away from the front line staff, who are the guts and bones of the council. They are the people there every day, in the public eye, dealing with the real issues. I’ve got to say, if you look at our staff, they are always there with a smile, talking to people. Yet, we are being treated as criminals almost. What gives them the right to do that? Then they are going to their chamber meetings and say they are not going to take a cut in their allowances.

“Am I a banker? I did not cause this mess. I am here to go and make the community safer. I have no dealings with banks in London and financial instability in UK or Europe. David Cameron is repeatedly saying that we are in it together but we are the only people paying.

“Bankers are the people who are getting billions of pounds as profit. The turnover of Royal Bank of

Scotland is ridiculous. They are starting to make huge amounts of money again. Surely, that money should be coming to my account as well. My taxpayer money helps support those banks. I should be getting a reimbursement for that, but instead I've got Royston Smith and his cronies taking away my money. Disgraceful!"

John, a social worker in child protection, said, "I've been working in this council for about four years. I am here today because of the pay cuts. We feel very insulted by, first of all, by the pay freeze for the last two years and secondly, the forced significant pay cut of 5.5 percent. With short notice, we were told to sign new contracts, otherwise we would be sacked.

"The morale of the staff is low compared to the time I joined four years ago. I think it partly due to the bullying attacks of the Conservative-controlled council.

"We find ourselves in a difficult position as social workers. We have to take a stand against the way we are being treated. We should protect the services for the future, because if the pay is very low people will not want to come and work here. We have had wide support from the rank and file of other branches across the country and some international support. There is a case for other sympathetic branches to take strike actions. I don't know why it is not happening.

"We all know that these cuts started as a result of a bankers-inspired financial crisis. My opinion is that it started with the deregulation of the financial sector in the 1980s. That is why we are in this massive debt crisis. This government is insistent that the ordinary local authority workers have to take the burden.

"I think, for me personally, it's a matter of principle to stand against it. As a social worker, I think the recent budget cuts to the National Health Service and welfare will have an impact on the most vulnerable people in the society."

Jean, a social worker, said, "The five percent pay cut affects me greatly. I can't afford to live on less than I get currently. I am a single mum. I really want my pay increased not cut.

"Because of these pay cuts I am short of quite a bit every month. If they put the money for key services they do not need to cut our pay, they are wasting money on unnecessary things and councillors are pocketing big allowances.

"Our workloads are heavy. There may not be a great

number of children in our case load but the work is intense. It's child protection and court work. There are no easy cases. There are huge ranges of problems people have. Children need parenting, foster parents and adoptive families need to be found for children. All these involve lots of paper work. So we actually do not get enough time to work with children who need help."

Leroy, a refuse collector, said, "I have been working in this council for ten years. We haven't had a pay rise for four years. Things are going up and our money is going down. We can't continue like this. We initially thought the pay freeze would stop the pay cuts, but no, it hasn't.

"I do not think that the unions should negotiate with the councillors for any sort of pay cuts. Although I lose a couple of quid a day because of these cuts, I will have to save some money to put on gas and electric. I can't go on a holiday. It's not a luxury to go on a holiday, but I can't afford it."



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