Unions lead Southampton council workers strike into blind alley

Tony Robson
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Around 1,000 Southampton council workers took strike action October 6 against a 5.5 percent pay cut. The Conservative-run authority imposed the wage reduction through the fire and rehire contracts issued to the 4,600-member workforce in July.

All those earning more than £17,500 a year have been hit by the pay cut, which comes on top of a two-year pay freeze. Some workers have suffered even more, with their wages reduced by up to 20 percent due to the cuts in other allowances.

The Unison and Unite unions hailed the stoppage as the biggest strike since May's selective action. But the move was a token protest, in line with the bureaucracy's ongoing efforts to wind-down and betray the dispute.

After 12 weeks of rolling strike action, the stoppage was, in fact, the first since August: and even then, Unison restricted the action to social workers.

For weeks the two unions have discouraged council workers from taking any further strike action, following the emphatic rejection of a revised pay cut presented at a joint mass meeting on August 10. The revised offer was nothing more than a repackaging of the cuts. It raised the threshold for the pay cut for those earning a yearly wage from £17,500 to £21,500, while the bulk of the cut in the yearly wage bill of £6 million remained intact. For those above this threshold, the pay cut was only to be reduced by 0.5 percent, still rising to 5 percent.

After this the Unison/Unite strike committee did not meet to set dates for further strike action. Instead they used the anti-strike legislation to discipline their members, stating that continued strike action would be outside the law of a 12-week legal protection and leave workers open to dismissal by Southampton City Council (SCC). Under conditions in which the leader of the Conservative-run authority, Royston Smith, stated that this would not be ruled out, the unions consulted council workers on a sectional basis as to whether they were prepared to walk out separately.

Writing for the United Left web site, Unite convenor Mark Wood stated, "We have now suggested to Council leaders that they take advantage of this pause to meet with us and resolve the dispute before continuing selective strike action."

The unions proceeded with the one-day stoppage only after receiving tacit consent from the council. On September 30, the Chief Executive retracted a previous threat made to business support staff that they were not covered by the industrial action and that it now considered the stoppage lawful. Only then did Unite announce its decision to call out its 700 members, while reiterating its commitment to implementing the pay cuts via other means, stating, "Since November 2010 the unions have proposed wage freezes and temporary pay cuts as a means of balancing its budget while retaining services. The council has consistently rejected this, forcing the industrial action which began this summer."

The council can afford to be supportive about such limited action. Thanks to the trade unions, it has already achieved what it set out to accomplish. The pay cuts are in place because the unions told members to sign up to the new contracts, ensuring that 98 percent of the workforce had accepted by the July 11 deadline. As a Unison bulletin stated, "Unison and Unite have made it clear that the July 11 deadline and the signing of the new contracts has no relevance in this dispute. The same issues remain. The cuts to pay and conditions and now the dismissals too are both unfair and illegal and members will continue to take action as a result."

The council is well aware that it is sitting on a social

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powder keg and knows that its allies in the trade union apparatus need the fig-leaf provided by such token stoppages to cover themselves in front of their members. Talks are scheduled for this week, in which the unions will push again for a revised pay cut it can try and dress up as a victory. The talks are being presented as the council having been "forced back to the negotiating table". But for the unions, negotiations will focus on just one goal—retaining their role as industrial policemen at all costs while they bargain away workers' jobs and conditions.

This treachery is the why the TUC has endorsed the policy of selective strike action in Southampton as the example to be followed nationally.

The imposition of the fire and rehire contracts in Southampton has set a precedent to be followed elsewhere. In the same month, Shropshire council served its workforce of 6,500 with dismissal notices and re-engagement based on a pay cut of 5.4 percent. After Unison members voted for strike action, the council threatened to withdraw the £100,000 yearly subsidy it provides to the union in the form of salaries paid to the two full time officials, a part-time post and use of offices.

Shropshire Council proceeded to tear up workers' contracts on September 30, while Unison, Unite and the GMB entered talks based upon acceptance. Its emergency meeting with the council proved too late to prevent a one-day strike on September 22, but the unions have stated this will be a one-off as they collaborate with management over how the pay cut is implemented. Unison has already accepted the 2.7 percent pay cut for the first year, proposing that it be realised through unpaid leave, and is in continued talks over the remaining 2.7 percent. Alan James, Shropshire branch secretary of Unison, told the BBC, "We feel these proposals are a step forward for staff, whilst still helping to make the massive savings that the council is required to achieve."

In Plymouth, the council resorted to the de-recognition of Unison in August after it failed to sign up to an agreement reached with the GMB and Unite. In due course, after a pathetic token campaign that was not supported with industrial action by any union, Unison fell into line and signed the agreement in September 14.

Southampton is proof, if further proof is needed, that any struggle by workers today in defence of their livelihoods demands a rank-and-file rebellion against the trade unions and the right-wing, pro-business Labour Party they support.

Keeping industrial action at the level of staggered stoppages is linked to the unions' campaign in Southampton to replace the Tories with Labour in next year's election. However, Labour group leader Richard Williams has disowned the strike and made it clear that Labour's preferred solution is to eliminate 1,500 jobs—over a quarter of the workforce.

Throughout Britain, Labour-controlled councils have ripped up workers' contracts, imposed massive job cuts and attacked wages while dismantling critical social services. Southampton has been targeted by the unions in large part because they want to maintain the illusion that the Tories are the only enemy of workers and not Labour, when party leader Ed Miliband has made explicit that the working class can expect no reversal of the Tory/Liberal-Democrat coalition's £100 billion austerity programme if Labour is re-elected.

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