

Unions move to sell out Southampton Council strike

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UNISON and Unite are moving to sell out the six-month struggle of Southampton council workers to reverse the 5.5 percent pay cut imposed by the Conservative council.

Just one week after the largest one-day strike since selective action began, both unions met with Southampton City Council (SCC) to work out a settlement based on a repackaged version of the pay cuts enforced in July through the issuing of fire and rehire notices to the 4,600 workforce.

The October 6 strike was intended only to provide a cover for the unions' plan to wind down opposition. It was the first stoppage since a series of rolling 12-week strikes ended in August, after Southampton council workers rejected the last revised pay cut. Since then the unions had stifled further action, saying it would contravene anti-strike legislation. It was only after the SCC consented to the one-day stoppage that the unions went ahead.

A joint statement issued following the talks expresses the consensus reached between UNISON, Unite and the SCC over the revised pay cut. It states, "On Thursday 13 October, the council and union leaders concluded negotiations and reached a position which could be the basis for a negotiated settlement to the current industrial dispute.

"The unions will now commence the process of discussing this with their members as the best that can be achieved in negotiation and there will be a ballot of members in November.

"The basis of this proposed negotiated settlement was reached by both council and unions agreeing to compromise on their positions in order to arrive at a conclusion to this long running dispute and return to normal everyday delivery of services to our customers."

The unions called off further action without details of the proposed settlement being made public. The withholding of information has continued in the run-up to mass meetings scheduled for November 2 and the ballot on November 4 when the proposed settlement will be put to members of both unions.

UNISON and Unite are well aware that their claims that the proposed settlement constitutes the best negotiable deal

cannot withstand scrutiny. Their secrecy and evasions are aimed at presenting the settlement as a fait accompli, denying workers the opportunity to formulate an alternative to this sell-out.

On its web site, a UNISON statement of October 24 admitted, "A number of members have contacted the UNISON office expressing concern at the delay in publishing details of the revised proposals."

It continued that "the delay...is not a decision that UNISON has made. UNISON has been pressing the Council for an agreed date when the proposals would be published to both union members and Council staff in general. The Council has not yet responded with an agreed date when the proposals will be published."

This mea culpa only serves to expose the level of collusion between the unions and the SCC. As far as UNISON is concerned, it is answerable not to its members but to the very SCC that unilaterally tore up pay and conditions. This even extends to whether workers are permitted to see the proposed agreement before they discuss and vote on it. For its part, Unite has not even issued a news release on its web site regarding the proposed settlement, let alone published its contents.

It was only on October 27 that UNISON relented and published the full version of the proposed settlement. The only "compromise" it contains is on the part of the unions, which have acceded to SCC demands. The proposed settlement does not differ fundamentally from the revised pay cuts so emphatically rejected by a majority of four to one in joint mass meetings back in August.

It has marginally increased the threshold for the pay cuts to those on a basic salary above £21,500 to £22,000. There is no change for those on scale point SCP 25 (£21,519) who had been removed from any pay cut and those on SCP 26 (£22,221) who had their pay cut reduced from 4.5 percent to 2 percent. The sole difference is for those above this threshold, whose pay cut will be reduced by a mere 0.3 percent. The top level of pay cut will still reach 5 percent.

Once again, the claim that the lowest paid are being spared

pay cuts is being used to push through wage cuts for half the workforce. In addition to this divisive strategy, all council workers will still face a two-year freeze in pay and increments. The current proposals only return an additional £170,000, plus £300,000 in one-off back payments—a sum less than the allowances paid to Southampton’s 45 councillors for the last financial year, which stood at £697,000.

The one significant addition in the proposed settlement is that it requires a total climb-down by the unions over the token legal challenge they mounted to the issuing of dismissal notices to enforce the 5.5 percent pay cut. UNISON and Unite had gone to the Employment Tribunal system, telling workers to sign the new contracts while seeking redress for financial compensation. The settlement requires that the unions now withdraw all support to workers involved in the very action they recommended! It states, “All unions agree not to commence/recommence any proceedings against the council on behalf of their members related to the Terms and Conditions.”

The proposed settlement has already been taken as a signal by the Tory council to press ahead with fresh attacks. The day after talks had concluded, the SCC announced plans to cut more than 200 jobs over the next year.

Having collaborated with the SCC on the new proposals, UNISON and Unite regional officials falsely claim that this does not amount to a recommendation. Their duplicity only underscores the rotten character of the deal they are seeking to foist upon council workers. While UNISON maintains it is the best deal negotiable Unite’s regional coordinating officer, Ian Woodland, told the local *Daily Echo* that it was “unacceptable”. In response, Tory council leader Royston Smith disclosed, “At the end of the meeting we had an understanding that the unions were going to recommend this offer to their members, so I’m surprised that Unite is now recommending a rejection and they want to pursue the industrial tribunal route when they made an agreement they wouldn’t do that as part of the settlement.”

In reality, Woodland’s supposed opposition to the proposed deal is restricted solely to the issue of refusing to drop the union’s legal challenge to the dismissal notices. No reference is made to the revised pay cut because it has been the position of UNISON and Unite from day one that cuts in workers pay and conditions had to be accepted.

The union’s partnership with the SCC is not an isolated incident. The use of dismissal notices to enforce pay cuts in Southampton has set a precedent. Shropshire County Council used the same means to implement a 5.4 percent pay cut in September. UNISON has fallen completely into line, after the council threatened to withdraw its funding to the union. After a one-day strike, UNISON called off any

further action and entered into negotiations with the council alongside Unite and the GMB over how the pay cut would be realised, albeit with minor changes. UNISON is currently balloting its members over acceptance of a 2.7 percent pay cut for the first year and a 1.9 percent pay cut the following year.

Not once have the unions even called for the dismissal notices and original pay cuts to be withdrawn as a precondition for talks. For them, the term “negotiations” merely implies maintaining their privileged position in negotiating away the pay, terms and conditions and jobs of their members. Meanwhile, they have sought to bring opposition to the Tories’ attacks behind the Labour Party and its 2012 local election campaign—under conditions in which the leader of the Labour Group, Richard Williams, has stated his preferred option for the cuts is to make 1,500 redundancies! The claim that brutal attacks on council workers’ terms and conditions is the sole preserve of the Tory party has been a key element in isolating the Southampton dispute, at a time when, across the country, Labour-controlled authorities are implementing budget cuts no less savage through direct collaboration with the unions.

The proposed settlement should be decisively rejected.

The stranglehold of UNISON and Unite must be broken and the fight to defend jobs, conditions and pay placed directly in the hands of the rank-and-file. Southampton council workers must link their fight with a wider struggle to defend the critical social services being dismantled by councils in every town and city and the launching of a political and industrial offensive to bring down the government. Economic life must be reorganised according to a rational plan, drawn up democratically by those who produce society’s wealth to satisfy human needs, not private profit.



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