

# Sheffield UK recycling workers strike to go indefinite

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21 June 2012

Workers at five recycling centres in Sheffield are to take indefinite strike action from Saturday if their dispute with the council is not resolved. They have already taken four three-day periods of industrial action and a further two-day strike last weekend.

In an attempt to save around £500,000 a year, Sheffield City Council reduced the opening hours of its five recycling centres, making seven workers redundant. The reduction in opening hours cuts the wage of the 35 remaining workers substantially. They have already suffered several waves of cutbacks, including the loss of 14 jobs in the recent period. They were made to sign new contracts of employment with worse conditions attached. Their current income is barely above minimum wage levels.

The cuts are carried out despite the huge profits made by the contracted company, Veolia Environmental Services, and its subcontractor, SOVA Recycling Ltd. Through the recycling of such articles as electrical equipment, scrap, paper and cardboard, the sites generate more than £900,000. On top of this, Sheffield council this year paid £941,000 to Veolia to run the service, of which SOVA received £600,000. It is estimated that the cost to keep the sites open as usual runs at around £900,000.

The subcontractor SOVA, which runs the recycling depots, is a registered charity, which among other things works with young offenders. During the strike days, the company was using young offenders as a scab force to keep two of the five sites open.

As in so many cases, the cuts are carried out by a Labour council blaming the austerity measures on the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Further cutbacks are already on the way. Last week, the council announced that it is to change its bin collection frequency from weekly to fortnightly starting next

month. The aim is to save £2.5 million a year. This will lead to a minimum of 42 job losses.

The situation facing workers in Sheffield is replicated throughout the country. Fully 270,000 public sector jobs were destroyed permanently last year as part of the £130 billion in cuts being imposed by the government. Six million public sector workers are on a two-year pay freeze. This makes 2012 the third year of wage cutting by the government.

With extra cuts at local level, pay has fallen by 13 percent in the last three years. Working families struggling to make ends meet are worse off than they were 30 years ago. Low-paid local government workers are systematically pushed into poverty.

These attacks could not be carried out without the complicity of the trade union bureaucracy. In this dispute, the GMB feigns support for a struggle only to ensure it remains under control before it is sold out. On the national level, the unions make sure that the anger against austerity does not erupt into broader struggles of the working class, demobilising all opposition to wage cuts and attacks on social conditions.

Teams of WSWS reporters spoke to the recycling workers at picket lines at the recycling centres.

One worker said, “Veolia is making profits of about a million a year, and SOVA is making money also. Sheffield Council also receives some of the profits. They are all making money, and they want to sack people.

“They expect us to recycle, but they’ve never provided us with tools to do the recycling. We have always had to salvage tools from the scrap brought in, which is clearly unsafe.

“They provide us with clothing and boots that are not waterproof. We have no ear protection at all from the noisy machinery. The working man’s cause has been

put back decades, ever since Maggie Thatcher.”

Another worker added, “Sheffield has three tiers of management. Why not cut two layers of management and keep these sites open?”

“SOVA employs young offenders, which I’m not against. These young people should have jobs. But they shouldn’t be used to push out our colleagues.

“Sheffield Council won’t talk to us, neither will Veolia or SOVA.”

At a picket of a different depot, a striking worker explained, “They put us on annualised hours. We had to sign a new contract or we were sacked. They told us in a written document. The union recommended signing the contract so that we could continue the struggle.

“Annualised hours mean we work perhaps 37.5 hours in summer and 22 in winter. When we work over in summer, we actually do not get paid for it, it gets banked for the winter period. Twenty-two hours on the national minimum wage of £6.08—that works out at £130 a week; you have to pay the rent, electricity, gas and all other bills from that, it doesn’t work out, you can’t survive on £130 a week.

“We believe that they are using starvation tactics to get us out.”



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