

# UK: Sheffield recycling workers strike sold out

Peter Reydt  
26 July 2012

At the beginning of this month, workers at five recycling centres in Sheffield voted to suspend their indefinite strike action and to resume normal work from Monday July 9.

Their employer, Sova, agreed to reinstate workers that have been made redundant and introduce a trial bonus scheme. However, two of the sacked workers had resigned previously, which means that jobs have been eliminated.

The opening hours of the recycling centres will be revised, cutting them by five and not 20 hours, as previously planned. None of these changes are guaranteed and are subject to further meetings with the employers, Sheffield City Council and the GMB trade union.

The course of the strike follows a now well-trod path of a dispute managed and controlled by the trade unions. First they feign support and organise a strike. Then, when the struggle comes to a point where it actually has an impact, they call it off on the basis of minor concessions while hailing a victory.

While the strike was ongoing, the GMB published an article on its web site analysing the destruction of jobs in the public sector. Under the headline, “236,900 Jobs Lost in Local Councils,” the article states, “Paul Kenny, GMB General Secretary said, ‘What lies behind these statistics is the cold hard fact that this government has destroyed 236,900 local authority jobs in England and Wales since the general election in 2010.

“In the UK as a whole 424,000 jobs have been lost in the public sector in that period. These cuts have created unemployment, denied job opportunities to young people and cut services as the bankers continue to rip away with their bonuses and their fiddles and Cameron’s mates carry on tax dodging to show who is

really paying the price for austerity in Tory Liberal Britain.”

What the article does not say is that the GMB has not lifted a finger to prevent any of this.

Indispensable for the union in strikes like that of the recycling workers is the support they receive from such fake-left organisations as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, who do all the footwork for the trade unions during the strike and provide a blessing for the union organisers after the sell-out, absolving them of any wrongdoing.

Typical is Bea Kay, writing in the *Socialist Worker*.

Under the headline, “Sheffield’s all-out strike has shown that workers have power”, Kay, who is listed as a GMB shop steward, praises the deal reached (“If honoured”) and a “trial bonus scheme that could give a £2 an hour rise to all workers.”

She adds, “Annualised hours *would be optional*. Pay for those who failed to secure foreman positions would be protected *until December*” (emphasis added).

The GMB’s failure to remove the threat of annualised hours and give no pay guarantee after December cannot be finessed in this way. These workers are on minimum wage, so a possibility of a £2 an hour rise is cold comfort indeed when they can be placed on a bare minimum of hours for weeks on end when business is slack. The work hours are cut in winter to 22 per week and this issue is unresolved.

The Socialist Party, though adopting a similar congratulatory tone, is forced to acknowledge in an article by Alistair Tice, “Not all the strikers voted to suspend the action. Several, including the two shop stewards, felt the indefinite strike action was really beginning to bite....”

And start to bite it did. Barnsley council had just announced that it would no longer tolerate Sheffield

residents using its dump sites during the strike in Sheffield, checking where people were living and turning non-Barnsley residents away.

But this is not the only reason why the GMB were pressing to end the indefinite strike. Last month Sheffield City Council announced that bin collections would be changed from weekly to fortnightly, threatening the loss of jobs for bin men.

What are the talks on these issues behind the scenes? Under these circumstances the strike by the recycling workers started to become a nuisance and was therefore ended—against the wishes of at least some of them, but with not one word of protest by the ex-left groups.

This reporter spoke to one of the recycling workers, called Tom to protect his identity. Tom explained that one day workers were picketing and “resolved to strike until all of our demands were met.” Then, “On Wednesday, we went for a rally to the town hall. When I got home I heard from the local news it had all been resolved. I think we got sold a bit short.”

Asked whether he knew about the reported £2 bonus payment mentioned in the deal, Tom replied, “Nobody understands this at the moment. Supposedly, SOVA are saying that if we recycle to our potential we can earn an extra £2 an hour bonus. But we haven’t had any figures. No confirmation. Nothing’s been said about it. We’ve come back to work and nothing is in stone. Only the lads that were sacked have been set back on. There’s nothing else been resolved as far as we know. Nobody knows anything. We’re all in limbo.

“Nobody’s heard anything from [Peter] Davies [the GMB Sheffield organiser]. He’s supposed to be having meetings, but no one knows anything definite.”

We asked Tom, “What would you say is the general feeling amongst your colleagues about the dispute so far?”

He replied, “I would say, about two thirds are still unhappy and they’re ready to walk [strike]. But we’ve been told to give it three weeks with negotiations. But the employer has been saying they’ve not agreed to anything. Their stance is still where it was. So we’re no better off.”

Asked about the general feeling among the workforce about the conduct of the union, Tom said, “It seemed to be cut a bit short. Morale was pretty high, and everything. But then, the next thing we know, we’re back at work. Whether somebody’s put pressure on

Pete [Davies] from above, I don’t know. It seems as if somebody higher up the union must have said ‘get it resolved’, or whatever. I don’t know. We were all fired up and it’s wound down. It’s stopped for some reason. And a few of the lads are dismayed.

“All it’s going to drag on and then probably we’re going to be out on strike again, aren’t we? Unless we get something sorted. But there’s nothing definite, is there?”

As yet there is still no news regarding any of the supposed concessions announced by the GMB having been implemented.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**