

Southampton City Council cuts expose UK unions as partners in austerity

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The Labour Party-controlled Southampton City Council announced massive cuts in jobs and services last month, claiming they were “painful, but necessary” to fill a £23 million gap in its budget. The cuts expose the claim of the trade unions that voting out the Conservatives and installing Labour in May’s council elections was the answer to the austerity measures unleashed across the country.

Local services will be decimated, with the loss of up to 327 jobs, about 8 percent of the workforce. The youth service, a children’s residential unit and some specialist units will be closed down completely and other services will be reduced. There will be job losses in waste collection, street cleaning and park management, as well as extra charges on local residents for council services. For those still employed there will be changes in work practices and increased workloads.

The latest cuts come after the previous Conservative Party-controlled council cut library services and staff and imposed a 5.5 percent pay cut through “fire and rehire” notices to all 4,600 council workers in 2010, as well as further job cuts and a swathe of unfair dismissals in 2011. Throughout these attacks, council workers were isolated by the Unite, Unison and GMB trade unions. Action was limited to rolling strikes that proved completely ineffectual and served to split up various sections of workers. After a revised pay cut was emphatically rejected by council workers in August 2011, the unions cited anti-union laws to discourage further action.

A further one-day strike in October 2011 involved only social workers. The token character of the action was underscored by the fact that 98 percent of the workforce had already been forced to sign new contracts under threat of losing their jobs, after being advised by the unions to do so.

Another one-day strike was proposed by Unison and Unite for last April, just before the May elections, but was called off at the last minute, with union leaders calling instead for workers to elect a Labour council. When local Labour Party leader Richard Williams made it clear that there would be 1,500 redundancies if Labour took office, Unison Regional Organiser Andy Straker complained, “[I]f this is what he is planning on doing I would have thought he would be trying to sit down with the unions, discussing how to make these cuts.”

Unite described the election of Labour as a “verdict that cuts do not work.” Unison called it an opportunity to restore industrial relations in the council.

In October, an official end to the dispute was declared after unions recommended acceptance of an agreement that restored pay to last year’s levels for the majority of staff by 2014—effectively a pay freeze over several years—with an assurance that “There are no job losses linked to the pay cuts restoration.”

The unions also agreed to drop claims for compensation over unfair dismissals, forecast to reach £12 million, declaring that those affected could continue their legal action, but at their own expense.

The agreement did not include the restoration of lost jobs and gave no specifics about redundancy payments. So shameful was this deal that even the Conservatives and the local *Daily Echo* called it a “betrayal.”

Unite Branch Secretary Mark Wood claimed the agreement represented the first reversal of pay cuts since the Tory-led government took power in 2010, and hailed “a substantial change in culture” that had “national significance.”

That it did. With the sell-out, the unions closed ranks with the Labour council and placed all blame for the new cuts on the previous Conservative administration

and the national Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

A joint declaration of the unions opposed demands for an end to the cuts, stating that “any suggestion that the Labour administration should either not set a budget or set an unlawful budget” would pass “control of the council” back to the Conservative Party, and lead to the imposition of “unelected commissioners ... who would run the council.” It condemned “false allegations that council workers have been ‘betrayed’ by the Labour administration.”

The unions are now channeling discontent in Southampton behind a joint Labour Party-trade union “Fair Funding” campaign for increased funds from central government and an empty call “to support the calling of a one day general strike of all trade unions in protest at the Government’s austerity policies.” The proposed date of the strike, February 13, coincides with the council meeting that will adopt the 2013 budget.

The fake-left Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) are politically covering for the trade unions and the Labour Party. In March last year, in the run-up to the May elections, the SP/SWP-backed Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) discussed organising a joint election campaign with Labour in Southampton. It was only after Labour insisted that TUSC withdraw candidates from some wards it was contesting that the talks ended.

Since the election, the SP and SWP have continued to spread illusions that Labour can be forced to fight against the cuts. The SP claims that the refusal of two of Labour’s 30 councillors to vote last month for the closure of Oaklands swimming pool, with the loss of 33 jobs, represents “a fighting alternative to the surrender offered by Labour.” It declares that the Labour council “has a mandate to oppose these cuts” and pleads with it to use reserves of £70 million and “prudential borrowing” to protect jobs and services. “This would buy time to mount a mass campaign mobilised to demand extra resources from the government,” it concludes, chiming in perfectly with the trade union-Labour Party “Fair Funding” campaign.

The SWP complains that Labour only posed as a supporter of striking council workers before the elections because it “could offer them a route back to control of the council.” And it acknowledges that the unions’ campaign to elect Labour “was a way to keep a

lid on demands for escalation and national solidarity.” But it then argues that the “Labour council is there because workers put it there,” and calls for more pressure to be placed on it.



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