

Scotland: Unions call off strike at Stirling City Council

Steve James

5 December 2013

Trade unions have called off strike action at Stirling City Council against the Labour/Conservative administration's plans to cut wages by 1.5 percent, increase the working week from 35 to 37 hours, impose an additional 7.5 days of work per year, and reduce overtime pay.

The concessions are the steepest to be imposed by any local authority in Scotland. When the additional days and hours are taken into consideration, the deal amounts to a pay cut of 4.5 percent. This is on top of a 13 percent real-terms decline in local government pay over the last 3 years.

After months of negotiations, Unison, Unite, GMB, and the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT), have conceded to all of the council's demands and are advising workers to accept the deal in separate ballots.

This betrayal follows the familiar strategy of deceit and sabotage deployed by the trade union bureaucracy across Britain and internationally to suppress any meaningful resistance to destruction of jobs, wages and vital social services on behalf of the corporate and financial elite.

The unions organised a token 24-hour strike in August, which was to be followed by further stoppages of separate departments, staggered on different days, involving only a fraction of the 3,000-strong workforce.

IT workers struck in September and the recently abandoned industrial action was to include separate week-long strikes of parking attendants and refuse workers beginning in the last week of October.

These utterly benign, localised protests are intended to hamstring resistance by isolating council employees from workers undergoing very similar attacks at other local authorities and across the public sector. They keep disruption to the government and employers to an absolute minimum, while upper-middle class trade union officials sign away the pay and conditions of their

members behind closed doors.

Even as the deadline for this limited action approached, the unions worked frantically to come to an accommodation with the council and call it off. When the Conservative/Labour executive proved unwilling to make any significant concessions, the trade unions simply attempted to repackage the original pay deal and present it as a new one.

In a press release dated November 15, the Chair of the Joint Trade Union Committee (JTUC), Abigail Robertson of Unison, said: "Following a series of meetings between Stirling Council management and GMB, UCATT, UNISON and Unite the Union, a revised set of proposals has been arrived at that allows for the continued suspension of industrial action whilst the unions consult their members on the new proposals."

Apart for some minor changes regarding overtime and holiday pay, which were largely agreed to by the council back in June, all major concessions remained. The unions have utilised the same fraudulent incentives offered by the employers to sweeten the deal and encourage the workforce to accept.

In a recent press release, Unison stressed that a minimum wage of £7.50 per hour will be instituted, the so-called "Scottish Living Wage", meaning a very small pay increase for low paid staff. It also claims that the pay cut and changes to the working week will be reversed by the council in further negotiations scheduled for April 2016.

Under conditions where the council plans to slash £29 million from its budget over the next five years, including annual payroll cuts of £2.5 million, the totally inadequate "Living Wage" will become the baseline to which the wages of all council workers are compressed. Unison also failed to inform its members that the council has made the reinstatement of pay levels dependent on the successful implementation of "efficiency savings" elsewhere—a euphemism for the gutting of locally delivered services.

Last week, Stirling tabled a raft of service cuts, including a hike in charges for school meals, a reduction in bin collection services, additional charges for garden waste collection, £3.9 million in cuts to social services, including adult, disabled and foster care services, £1.8 million in education services and £800,000 in social housing. The council told the *Daily Record* that it was unable to confirm whether or not redundancies would be made.

The unions have no intention of defending working people or the vital social services which keep millions from destitution.

From the outset, the JTUC has worked intimately with the Scottish government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the umbrella organisation for Scottish councils, in preparing a massive assault on workers' pay and conditions across local government.

Last month, Unison and Unite refused to organise any opposition when, on the back of a two-year pay freeze, COSLA unilaterally imposed a miserly pay increase of 1 percent for 2013-14 and another 1 percent for 2014-15—a steep pay reduction when rapidly inflating living costs are factored in.

It was this general pay deal which laid the groundwork for the assault on Stirling workers in the first place, as it allows for individual councils to implement their own supplementary pay and job cuts depending on local financial circumstances.

Most councils intend to cut hundreds of jobs in the coming years. Glasgow has cut its headcount by 256 over the past year and intends to make a further £71 million in “efficiency savings” by 2015. North Ayrshire will axe 317 jobs by 2015-16 and East Dunbartonshire will lose 250 positions over the next 18 months, to name just a few of the most severe cases. Unison estimates that approximately 35,000 local government jobs have been cut over the past 3 years.

This attack on local government workers is the result of massive cuts in grants handed down from Holyrood, the devolved Scottish legislature in Edinburgh. Local authorities have experienced a 15 percent cash-terms reduction in funding since 2009-10.

In recent years, the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP) has loaded most of the billions in spending cuts that it has passed in collaboration with Westminster onto local government. By shifting responsibility for gutting public services and axing jobs onto local councillors, the nationalists are seeking to distance themselves from the hated austerity policies of the British

Conservative/Liberal Democrat government and package Scottish separatism as an alternative. In doing so they hope to overcome a long-running dearth of support for Scottish independence in time for next September's referendum.

While most trade unions have yet to back either Scottish separatism or the continuation of the Union, they have assisted the SNP in perpetrating this fraud. This is because the division of working people along reactionary regional and national lines serves the trade unions' own purpose of heading off a unified movement in the working class against austerity and, its source, capitalism.

Unison, which has led talks with COSLA and Stirling council and has 150,000 members across the UK, has limited the struggles of local government workers to a polite appeal for the SNP to end the council tax freeze. The measure has constrained one of the major revenue streams for local authorities since it was introduced in 2007 and disproportionately benefits wealthy homeowners with property in the most expensive tax bands.

It has worked to sow illusions in Scottish nationalism and divert responsibility for the cuts solely toward Westminster.

Commenting on mass job cuts and pay negotiations, a spokesperson for Unison Scotland stated, “That's the climate in which our people have to operate under the current Tory austerity policies.”

Dougie Black, Unison's regional organiser, recently told BBC Scotland that he was working closely with councils across Scotland to minimise job losses and protect local services. “The Scottish government has got a difficult budget to manage in the circumstances,” he said.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact