

Care workers strike against Glasgow, Scotland City Council

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Care workers embarked upon a 48-hour strike on Tuesday and Wednesday last week against changes to pay and working conditions planned by the Labour Party-led Glasgow City Council.

Fifteen care homes for the elderly and one home for the physically disabled, which collectively provide support for 600 people, were affected. Pickets were held outside each of the homes, and around 60 carers protested outside the city chambers on Tuesday.

While no cash reduction to the basic salary has been proposed, the council's introduction of a new 12.5-hour shift pattern will result in a pay cut of around 7 percent (£1,495 per year for full-time staff) for 182 of the 536-strong workforce. The majority of these are non-permanent staff, who will be given permanent contracts under the deal, but will lose out on payments for working unsociable hours.

According to Unison, the public sector trade union in charge of the strike, as well as longer shifts the council is seeking to impose reduced staff/resident ratios and additional responsibilities on the lowest paid staff, including a range of medical treatments.

Unison only reluctantly went ahead with the strike after its members refused to accept the deal. Brian Smith, Unison's Glasgow branch secretary and member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, told the press: "We have not taken action lightly but have no alternative. Again, we ask Glasgow City Council to work with us to reach an agreement."

The strike has been mobilised on the limited basis of slightly renegotiating changes to shift patterns.

It follows the pattern of a very similar dispute in Glasgow late last year, involving Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs), who provide educational support to school pupils with learning disabilities. The 1,500-strong PSA workforce took part in 17 weeks of industrial action, including four one-day strikes, in response to the

council's plans to impose new responsibilities, without additional pay or adequate training, including a range of medical procedures.

Unison encouraged PSAs to vote against further industrial action in December after receiving a number of minimal and undefined assurances from the council. These included a vague commitment to alter training procedures, a slight pay rise of £534 for those workers willing to perform additional duties, and a new post incorporating responsibility for overseeing more complex medical procedures.

It is still unclear how many workers will be eligible for a pay rise and what form the new training will take. Unison sent PSAs back to work while this was still being negotiated. Even if each assistant received an additional £534, this would be a paltry 4.5 percent pay increase for a workforce that is amongst the lowest paid in the public sector. PSAs are currently paid a salary of £11,800, similar to pay levels in social care and well below that considered necessary for a single person to achieve a minimum acceptable standard of living.

The Scottish section of the Socialist Party, which controls leading positions within the Glasgow branch of Unison, has presented this as a victory and proposed the strategy as a model for further industrial disputes.

An article published on the Socialist Party Scotland website commented: "Education workers and Unison members in Glasgow have won an important breakthrough."

"The UNISON branch," it continued "is committed to learning and applying the lessons of the Education members strike action to future industrial action..."

This is an utterly fraudulent appraisal of the dispute. Neither was it an "important breakthrough," nor do the trade union bureaucrats who populate the leadership of the Socialist Party have anything new to learn from it.

In conditions of a generalised and historic assault on

public sector workers throughout Britain, the limiting of disputes to single councils, hospitals, libraries or other social amenities, in which only a fragment of the local workforce is mobilised in placing minimal and ultimately futile demands on management, is a familiar and treacherous strategy utilised by the trade unions to strangle any meaningful opposition to austerity and the capitalist system they defend.

In October of last year, Unison facilitated the Scottish government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the peak organisation of Scottish Councils, in driving through a real-terms pay cut for all council workers on the back of a two-year pay freeze.

The general pay deal has prepared the groundwork for an assault on local government workers as it allows individual councils to implement their own supplementary pay and job cuts depending on local financial circumstances. So confident were the employers in the perfidy of the trade unions that some councils began to institute even steeper concessions before the deal was even finalised.

Stirling Council was the first to impose additional cuts amounting to 4.5 percent. After organising a few localised one-day stoppages designed to isolate and exhaust the workforce, Unison encouraged workers to accede to all of the demands of the Labour/Conservative administration in December and quickly wound up the dispute.

This is despite Unison's own estimates that 35,000 jobs have been axed across Scotland's 32 local authorities in recent years, with thousands more to come.

Sweeping cuts to local government grants handed down by the Scottish National Party government in Edinburgh are driving the assault on council workers. The COSLA reported a 10 percent real-terms cut in council funding since 2010-11.

This has had a catastrophic impact on care services, which is one of the principal outlays for local authorities. The growing cost of providing residential and personal care for the elderly and disabled as the population ages has plunged many local authorities into the red. Over half of all councils predict a combined social care overspend of £35 million for this year, with the COSLA predicting a cumulative £2.5 billion funding shortfall by 2030.

Age Scotland has reported a growing number of cases where personal care visits are limited to seven minutes, as councils cannot afford to provide adequate support. Age Scotland spokesperson Katrina Coutts said: "The consequences for vulnerable older people can be severe, with rushed visits increasing the likelihood that changes

in their physical and mental health needs will be overlooked."

Funding pressures have also resulted in a dangerous deterioration of standards in residential care. In Edinburgh alone 15 percent of care accommodation, 400 beds, have been closed due to safety problems associated with understaffing and inadequate training. This counts a number of care homes run by private health care multinational Bupa, including its Pentland Hill facility in Corstorphine, which is currently under investigation by Scottish police for four deaths.

The deterioration of standards is the culmination of a massive cost-cutting and privatisation drive by cash-strapped councils. Private providers are able to undercut in-house care by over 50 percent by employing workers at near poverty wages, while local authorities have increasingly employed precarious agency labour in the homes they run directly.

Brian Smith unwittingly exposed the role of the trade union bureaucracy in this, as well as the entire pseudo-left fraternity which lends it unswerving support, when he told the press: "We haven't had a strike at an elderly care home for around 20 years - nobody wants to be in this position."

The trade unions have long ceased to be workers' organisations in any meaningful sense. Fully integrated into the capitalist state and vehemently hostile to the basic interests of the working class, they function as an industrial police force which is spearheading the catastrophic austerity agenda of the ruling class in Scotland, across Britain and internationally.

No defence of jobs or services is possible within the nationalist and pro-capitalist framework of the trade unions. It is necessary to build new independent rank-and-file organisations dedicated to forging a common offensive of working people throughout Britain and around the world in the fight for a socialist transformation of society.



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