

Workers protest East London Labour council budget cuts

Paul Stuart
21 October 2014

Outside an October 7 council cabinet meeting, hundreds of local authority workers protested against the Labour Party-dominated Barking and Dagenham borough council's plan to cut £53.5 million from the budget over the next three years. Bin lorries filled surrounding roads and blasted horns.

The cuts are scheduled to be finalised at a council meeting December 1.

After taking all 51 seats in the 2010 council election, ousting all 12 far-right British National Party (BNP) councillors, Labour launched £90 million in cuts against the jobs and services of those that elected them. Eight hundred jobs have been lost, involving massive cuts to social and cleansing services that have had a devastating impact on the impoverished borough.

Barking and Dagenham, with a population of 200,000, is among the most deprived boroughs in London, 22nd nationally. It has the joint highest unemployment rate in London, alongside the neighbouring borough of Newham, East London. The homeless charity shelter reported last year that, alongside Newham, it had the highest rate of threatened repossessions—one in every 37 houses—in London and throughout Britain.

Although the precise details of the cuts have not yet been agreed to, the council plans a further 410 job losses. All direct services, job descriptions and grades are to be restructured. The council wants a major cut in payments for safety checks of vehicles and want them done within existing hours—potentially a £2,000 wage cut for refuse workers.

Chief Executive of Shelter Campbell Robb recently explained, “The journey from being a homeowner to becoming homeless is frighteningly swift, with just one small thing like a wage cut, a health problem or a job loss meaning that a family can no longer meet their

mortgage payments.”

More cuts are proposed to library opening times—cuts to a service whose public access is already one of the lowest across the capital. Care and homeless centres are also facing closure. Cuts will be made to adult education, and the council is considering charges for face-to-face council services. The council is considering imposing a charge on the over-sixties for access to leisure centres.

A major assault on children and youth services is planned in a borough with the largest percentage of pre-school children and teenagers in London. All council-run youth services will be handed over to the “voluntary” sector. At 23 primary school locations, the council proposes removing lollipop ladies—who stop traffic to allow children to safely cross roads.

The council acknowledges that the cuts bring “a risk that some reductions in services could lead to more families reaching crisis...”

The opening up of all areas of council properties to private advertising is described as “Marketing the public realm”. Unspecified cuts are to be made to council “legal and democratic services”. The council is also considering handing over the running of all allotments, where residents have a patch of land to grow fruit, vegetables and flowers, to allotment societies.

The cuts are so severe that the first item of business the council cabinet meeting discussed was a ban on the public and press attending the meeting due to “the nature of the business to be transacted”. Council leader Darren Rodwell said the cuts will be “huge”. Using the language of a butcher, he said the council is not just “trimming fat as that has already been done”.

The only budget cut deferred is council funding of trade union representation. The council document

proposed a “40 percent reduction in budget for Trade Unions”, but then added that this will be “deferred” to 2017/18 “in recognition of the support the Trade Unions will need to give to the change process”.

According to reports, there are eight trade union posts on the council, six of them controlled by the British Trade Union (GMB), worth in total £320,000.

In the 2010 local council elections the trade unions, the fake left Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) all supported a vote for Labour to kick out the BNP. The SWP glorified the result, stating at the time, “Labour won by a landslide in Barking and Dagenham. In her acceptance speech Margaret Hodge MP called the BNP fascists for the first time.”

The SP argued that only through the “trade union movement” could the BNP be fought, without explaining that the unions had thrown their weight behind a vote for Labour.

The consequence of subordinating the working class to the perspective of re-electing Labour councillors and members of parliament is now being felt.

The SP still insist that it is only through the trade unions and “rebel” Labour councillors putting forward an alternative budget that cuts can be resisted. This is a lie. Throughout Britain, the trade unions have collaborated with Labour-run councils to impose Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition governments’ austerity measures. This has been the case in Barking and Dagenham over the last four years.

The alternative budget being proposed will “initially draw on the £27 million of reserves, but must ultimately campaign for more funds from central government...”

An SP article of October 8, “Barking and Dagenham council at the crossroads”, cites a recent example of the Southampton local authority where a “rebel” councillor advanced similar alternative budgets.

What the SP does not want to discuss is the role it played in derailing the powerful fight launched by Southampton council workers in 2011-12 against the Conservative-run authority’s budget cuts. Acting as the mouthpiece of the union bureaucracy, it assisted them in subordinating council workers to helping Labour win a majority on the council.

Once the union bureaucracy’s objective had been achieved, they abandoned council workers and supported Labour’s £23 million budget cuts involving

327 jobs (eight percent of the workforce). The unions blamed it on the previous Conservative administration.

Through their electoral front, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), the SP held private meetings with Southampton Labour Party politicians, discussing an electoral pact. Labour officials feared they would not get elected because of their treacherous record. This involved TUSC withdrawing its candidates in marginal council wards in return for Labour withdrawing from wards giving TUSC a free hand. The pact only failed after Labour officials withdrew.

The SP and TUSC in Barking and Dagenham are proposing the same bankrupt strategy, only this time to maintain Labour in office. In the SP’s October 8 statement, they describe meeting in the 2014 May elections with “councillors who had resigned from the Labour Party and who aligned themselves with Labour’s past...”

The article explained the SP’s perspective for the 2015 general election: “TUSC supporters in Barking intend to stand a candidate against Barking MP and millionaire heiress Margaret Hodge in next year’s general election, unless she agrees to take a strong anti-cuts stance—which must now include opposing the council’s present round of cuts.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact