

Glasgow homeless caseworkers' strike ended

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Glasgow homelessness caseworkers, who assess the needs of homeless people and their families across the city, ended their strike against Glasgow City Council (GCC) at a July 21 meeting.

Caseworkers voted to accept the Labour controlled council's offer after a 17-week strike, during which they picketed daily outside Glasgow City Chambers.

The strike by members of Unison, the largest public sector union in the UK, was the culmination of a longstanding dispute over pay grades and the introduction of a job evaluation scheme.

Three out of every four strikers were women, who are some of the lowest paid workers in the council. They were demanding equal pay with others in similar roles.

Unison had demanded that all 77 caseworkers be re-graded without "job evaluation" from their current grade 5 to grade 6. The re-grading would mean a pay increase of £5,000 per annum in line with other grade 6 workers. A further demand was for all increases to be backdated.

Council leaders and the homelessness caseworkers' management ignored the demands of the union and the strikers for 10 weeks, attempting to break the strike by using non-experienced workers to deal with complex caseloads. The council threatened a 30 percent cut in the number of homelessness caseworkers, cutting their staffing budget by more than £80,000. The council also tried to divide the strikers by offering some re-grading and not others. All such offers were rejected on principle.

Labour councillor Malcolm Cuning, GCC's Executive Member for Social Care, expressed his contempt for the plight of the strikers by saying if he found £350,000 "under the settee", or if the Scottish Government handed him an "envelope with £350,000 in it", he would not give in to the strikers' demands.

Homelessness caseworkers throughout Glasgow are estimated to have 3,000 open caseloads. Cuts to

welfare, the under occupancy penalty (the "Bedroom Tax"), the benefit cap, cuts to Housing Benefit and Tax Credits for families with more than two children, along with the recent announcement of a 30 percent cut to asylum seeker support have all led to a sharp increase in homelessness. The Scottish Housing Regulator raised "significant concerns" with Glasgow City Council last year, suggesting it was failing to meet its legal duty to homeless people.

A caseworker anonymously told the city's *Evening Times* in 2014 that the department she worked in for nearly a decade was in meltdown due to lack of resources and staff shortages. She explained that while families with children are prioritised, "Single males, single females and couples get turned away on a daily basis... There can be easily six people a day and the same six will turn up day after day looking for help. The service is at breaking point. I've never known morale as low as it is."

The situation in Glasgow is echoed throughout Scottish local authorities in frontline services such as social work, justice and homecare, which have all seen staffing and resource levels fall dramatically. The context is £2 billion worth of cuts to services dictated throughout Scotland and implemented by both Labour and Scottish National Party local authorities, as part of the Conservative government's ongoing austerity programme. Glasgow City Council alone is required to make a further £71 million in "savings" on top of annual cuts averaging around £35 million per year since 2010.

Many of the cuts have come in the form of budget squeezes, where workers leaving a service voluntarily are not replaced, creating ever increasing workloads for fewer workers. Unison has estimated that over 40,000 jobs have been lost throughout Scotland's public sector in the last few years.

In the midst of this daily assault on hundreds of

thousands of workers, Unison kept the Glasgow caseworkers isolated, allowing the city council to wear them down while seeking to close down the dispute at the first opportunity. Even then, the return to work was not by unanimous vote.

Unison has admitted: “The assessment process and the lack of any backdated money are a disappointment.”

One of Unison’s central demands, to end the “job evaluation” process, was not conceded. Workers will not be entitled to any back date of their wage increase, leaving the council able to pay it after the “assessment processes”.

In effect, skilled and experienced workers have to prove that they can do their job, albeit at a slightly higher grade, with a paltry £350 being accepted while the assessment process is ongoing. Not all homelessness caseworkers have been awarded the grade pay increase, which amounts to £1,000 after successful completion of the assessment, rising to £5,000 by 2018.

Only 68 of the 77 will receive this increase. Three temporary workers will be re-deployed to permanent posts elsewhere in the homeless service and there will be a reduction in management posts. It remains to be seen how many of the 68 workers successfully meet the council’s unfair assessment protocol and actually receive their new grade and pay increases.

At the end of it all, the caseworkers will be returning to an even more chaotic and failing service compared with 17 weeks ago.

None of this stopped the pseudo-left groups declaring a great victory. The Socialist Workers Party wrote, “Glasgow City Council workers have shown that if workers fight, they can win. And they have shown how we can resist and beat austerity.”

The Socialist Party Scotland, which controls leading positions within the Glasgow branch of Unison and claims Glasgow Unison is “socialist-led”, baldly asserted: “Bosses defeated” and “strike action works”.

Public sector front-line workers should not be fooled by these organisations about the role of trade unions, which time and again have showed their complicity with savage attacks on jobs and services. A genuine fight against austerity and the attacks on public services requires the formation of action committees, controlled by workers, committed to a socialist programme and

independent of the trade unions.



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