UK: Veolia sacks binmen for helping elderly man

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The global water and waste company Veolia has sacked three binmen in Chatham, southeast England, for the "crime" of collecting the wrong refuse.

Alex Steven, Robert Jefford and Dave Clark were charged with "gross misconduct" for throwing bags of rubble into their refuse wagon. Steven told *KentOnline* reporters: "We were just trying to help an old man out. He had moved in and all these things had been left in the garden. We were just trying to do our jobs. We have had problems in the same road before and whenever we would radio in about collecting an item someone had left out, we were always told to just throw it in."

Steven continued: "I've never been unemployed. I've worked for Veolia for six-and-a-half years and never got a verbal warning. I've got a 13-year-old daughter and an 11-year-old son and Christmas to think about. I'm 49—at my age it is not going to be easy to find another job."

Clark added, "I'm out of a job now. I've got eight children, including a disabled daughter who is in full-time care, and I've got a mortgage to pay."

Kelly RCR commented on *KentOnline*, "Such a shame, this crew is so efficient and friendly, going the extra mile to clear up all the mess the foxes make as well as returning bins/bags to a safe place so as not to get blown away in the wind. The only crew I have ever known in this area to be truly helpful."

Local residents have started a collection for the binmen and an online petition has been launched.

Veolia's vindictive actions will come as no surprise to the millions of workers who have been subject to outsourcing and privatisation, wage cuts, down-grading and speed-up over recent years. The privatisation of public-sector services has been a major reason for Veolia rapidly becoming one of the largest transnational utility companies. It has 174,000 employees in dozens of countries, and revenues of around $27 billion a year.

In the United States and Canada, Veolia is responsible for operating water and waste management systems in several hundred cities. It is notorious for its role in the water contamination crisis in the US city of Flint.

In the UK, its entry into the market and subsequent rapid growth were made possible by the deregulation and privatisation of public services started by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. In 1993, the year after Thatcher's successor, John Major, first introduced the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Public Private Partnerships (PPPs), Veolia won the waste management contract in Birmingham, the UK's second largest city.

The expansion of PFI/PPPs by the Labour government of Tony Blair saw Veolia acquire one contract after another, to the point where it is now Britain's largest waste management company, with revenues in the UK of around £1.5 billion a year, nearly twice its nearest rival.

The jobs that Steven, Clark and Jefford had were part of a £200 million contract signed with Medway City Council in 2010 to provide recycling and street cleaning services for seven years and waste treatment for 25 years. In that same year, Veolia unilaterally announced it was giving all of its workers employed in connection with its 197 UK public service contracts 90 days-notice of their intention to make them redundant and re-employ them on worse terms and conditions.

In 2012, in similar circumstances to those in Chatham, binmen in the London Borough of Bromley voted to strike after four co-workers were sacked on gross misconduct charges, accused of collecting “excess” garden waste from a resident. Even though an appeals panel ruled that allegations the binmen received cash to take the rubbish away were false, they were not reinstated. Veolia continued to insist they should have charged the resident a special collection fee.

In 2013, Bromley workers once again voted for strike action, along with those in Croydon and Camden, against a pay offer of just one percent, following years of pay freezes.

Most recently, workers employed on a contract with Sheffield City Council have been in a long-running dispute with Veolia. GMB union official Peter Davies accused the company of “aggressive” management practices, including 96 gross misconduct cases in the year to April 2016.

Such practices make a mockery of the 2013 decisions to name Veolia the Vocational Employer of the Year and Large Employer of the Year. They also expose the role of the unions.

In 2013, the Unite union issued a press release titled “Veolia bucks the trend,” praising the company for investing over £8,000 on a new trade union office and staff mess room in the London Borough of Haringey. Unite regional officer Paul Travers declared, “It is extremely pleasing that an idea put forward by the union has been taken seriously by Veolia ES [Environmental Services] and that the company has not only supported it, but has also shown real commitment to their workforce.”

In February 2014, Travers again praised Veolia for agreeing to a new convenor in London, saying, “I am pleased to see that whilst the company is under increasing pressure to make savings on their municipal contracts, they remain committed to ensuring reasonable industrial relations and that their staff, our members, are represented and supported.”

Veolia are, in reality, only acknowledging the services of the trade union bureaucracy as its ally in policing the work force. The company is ensuring the loyalty of its servants by protecting their privileges—at a minimal cost of a few thousand pounds.

Thanks to the trade unions, throughout the UK industrial action has fallen to record low levels at the same time that years of austerity have slashed services, wages and conditions. Huge cuts to local council budgets are accelerating outsourcing and privatisation. It is little wonder that Veolia boasts on its website, “By the end of 2008, we had in place national recognition and procedural agreements within municipal services with a number of trade unions, including UNISON, Unite the Union and GMB.”

The brutal punishment handed out to the Chatham binmen is in marked contrast to the treatment afforded former chairman and CEO, Jean-Marie Messier, who is guilty of genuinely criminal acts. Once an adviser on privatisation to the French government in the 1980s, Messier oversaw the transformation of the French water company Compagnie Générale des Eaux (CGE) into a global utility and media conglomerate, Vivendi, over the course of a decade. This was achieved through mergers, cost-cutting and corruption. A third of the company’s board of directors were under investigation in 1996. In 2002, Vivendi announced losses of $23 billion, leading to a breakup, out of which Veolia was created.

Messier was given a suspended three-year sentence for embezzlement in 2011, but not before he received a $20 million severance payout. Even though in 2013 Veolia disclosed accounting fraud in the US amounting to $120 million during Messier’s time there, a Paris court of appeals reduced Messier’s sentence to a suspended ten-month sentence and a €50,000 ($70,000) fine.