

Wakefield school cleaning workers sacked after three-month strike in UK

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Three women cleaners who had staged a near three-month long strike and picket to defend their pay and conditions were sacked just before Christmas.

Lesley Leake, Marice Hall and Karen McGee have carried out a determined struggle against their employer, Barnsley-based C&D Cleaning. They were employed at the primary school in the village of Kinsley near Wakefield, West Yorkshire and between them had nearly 30 years of service.

The school was originally run by Wakefield District Council but in 2015 it became an academy run by Wakefield City Academy Trust. On April 4, 2016, the academy contracted out the cleaning of the school to C&D Cleaning Group.

When they received their first pay packet in April, the three found their rate of pay had been reduced from £7.85 an hour under the council conditions to only £6.70 an hour. They contacted C&D officials who claimed they assumed they were under 25 years of age and only entitled to the minimum wage rate for under 25s of £6.70. The company rectified this and in their May pay packet they were paid the adult minimum wage rate of £7.20 an hour, still below their original £7.85 an hour. They were also paid for fewer hours—under the Wakefield Council contract they were paid the full 59.7 hours a month they worked. Under C&D, they were only paid for between 47 to 52 hours a month.

In addition to an effective pay cut of around 25 percent, their leave, sick leave and pension entitlements were much reduced.

After failing to get redress for the attack on their conditions, they contacted Unison, the trade union. Unison in turn contacted C&D and, according to a report in the October 9 *Guardian*, was told by Nick Thorpe, head of human resources, “We do not

recognise you or your organisation and subsequently we will not be entering into any form of dialogue with you in relation to our employees.”

He added, “I understand … the impact for you as an organisation when members realise that we are no longer living in the 1980s and they question the actual value of union membership when you have no say, power or influence over their employer.”

Faced with the intransigence of their employer, at the beginning of September the women walked off the job and established a picket line at the school and outside C&D’s premises in Barnsley.

Unison took the company to an industrial tribunal. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), the government mediation body, intervened. On December 9, the cleaners returned to work. A union Kinsley Cleaners Twitter account entry on that date announced: “After almost 14 weeks on strike the Kinsley Three returned to work today with their head held high. Thanks for all your support and solidarity.”

Details of the return to work deal were not made public. However, the company then issued the three with a letter asking them to attend a disciplinary hearing scheduled for December 12. This meeting was then postponed until December 19 and afterwards the three cleaners were sacked on December 22. The day prior to being sacked the three received a Christmas card from C&D.

The *Guardian* December 23 quoted a statement from C&D Cleaning regarding the sacking. It read, “The employees were invited to a disciplinary hearing on an earlier date in December to respond to allegations of gross misconduct. At the employees’ request, the hearing took place on 19 December 2016, as their chosen Unison representative was not available on the earlier date.

“Full details of the allegations were provided to the employees in advance of the hearing. The employees and their representatives were given full opportunity to put their cases. The outcome of the hearing was termination of employment. The individuals have been informed of their right of appeal. The company will not comment further at this stage so as not (sic) prejudice any internal process.”

The three women have vowed to continue their fight and win reinstatement. Unison General Secretary Dave Prentis said the union would be consulting lawyers.

The dispute became a cause célèbre for the trade unions and pseudo left organisations who sought to utilise the principled struggle of the women as a means of reviving illusions in the moribund unions. At a rally in Barnsley on October 15, Robin Symonds, a full-time Unison regional organiser and a member of the Jeremy Corbyn-supporting Labour Representation Committee, said, “These are a beacon of hope for the trade union movement... I have no doubt whatsoever that the Kinsley Three will win. How could they not win with the support of the trade union movement behind them?”

Tosh McDonald, president of the train drivers union ASLEF, a member of the Labour Party and a supporter of Corbyn, said, “This movement of ours can support three women as long as it takes, if it takes until we get a Corbyn-led government... to take away the riches that these people (C&D) earn... we as a movement will sustain you... This is a battle we will win.”

Jane Aitchison, president of Leeds Trades Union Congress, a rep for the Public and Commercial Services union, a Labour member and joint national secretary of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party-backed Unite the Resistance, added, “We could support three women with our movement for a bloody long time... we support these women for as long as it takes by any means necessary.”

Despite this bluster the three were sacked and the unions did not organise a single one of their members to support them. Wakefield District Branch of UNISON, with approximately 9,000 members, has not yet even reported the sacking with its last article on the dispute dated September 28, 2016.

The Socialist Workers Party responded with a six-paragraph article, two of which consisted of quotes from Unison bureaucrat Symonds. The article concluded with the bogus claim, “The Kinsley Three

have got the backing of the wider trade union movement in Yorkshire.”

The reality is that the sackings are a further indictment of the trade union bureaucracy and its apologists among the pseudo-left. Unison, with a membership of more than 1.2 million and an annual income from dues and other sources of more than £200 million, has proved unwilling and incapable of defending the jobs and conditions of three cleaners.

The sacking of the Kinsley Three took place at the same time as the unions were sabotaging workers struggles in a number of key industries over the holiday period.

On December 20, the UK’s largest union, Unite, announced it had reached a deal with Swissport, and called off a planned four-hour walkout by 1,500 workers. A few days later, the union called off a planned strike, due to take place at 18 airports, of British Airways cabin crew.

On Wednesday, Southern Rail imposed its Driver Only Operation (DOO) system, in which drivers close train doors instead of guards, following months of strikes by rail workers to oppose the measure. Thousands of guards jobs are threatened at Southern and nationally as a result. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and ASLEF have worked to divide workers, in opposition to organising a united offensive against the attacks. In October, the RMT paved the way for the company to impose the attacks by advising their members to sign the new contracts Southern were demanding—downgrading the workers to “on-board supervisors.”



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