

UK: Janitors and IT workers at Glasgow City Council face common struggle

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Janitors and IT staff at Glasgow City Council (GCC) are involved in hard fought and bitter disputes with the Labour Party-run authority.

Janitors employed by Cordia, an arm's length organisation of GCC set up to run support and caring services, have been taking industrial action since January 2016. Over the course of 2016, they have taken around 28 days of strike action of between one to five days in length along with work to rules. The yearlong dispute was initially regarding Working Context and Demand Payments--annual payments of between £500 and £1,000, for heavy lifting and removing dangerous materials from playgrounds.

The strike is also now about pay and threatened job losses. Cordia announced a pilot scheme in November last year that would reduce from six to four the number of janitors covering six pilot schools. The scheme will begin next month, with a view to cutting 25 percent of janitors across the city.

In November last year, specialist IT workers employed by GCC voted by 95 percent for a strike against privatisation plans. The IT workers have been involved in staggered strike action through November and December, with the dispute predicted to continue throughout the winter. The strike was provoked when GCC's Executive Committee voted in favour of a proposal to privatise the council's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) services.

Both groups of workers are members of the Unison trade union, which is working to ensure that they remain divided. To date only one poorly-advertised joint protest has been called outside Glasgow City Chambers--headquarters of Glasgow City Council.

Unison is working to ensure that both the janitors' and IT workers' disputes are restricted to stunts and campaigns, based on exerting the mildest pressure on

the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP) government.

More broadly, Unison aims to keep the Glasgow disputes separate from the identical threats facing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of council workers and fellow Unison members in every single local authority in Britain. Unison's aim, like countless previous similar disputes, is to run them into the sand as soon as possible.

In Unison's December 2016 issue of "Scotland in Unison--Scottish council's activists bulletin," the IT workers strike is given front-page coverage, but not a word is printed in the whole edition on the janitors' strike.

The effect is to isolate the workers under conditions of severe attacks on pay and conditions and a worsening jobs crisis facing all local authority workers. In October, the union gave evidence to the Local Government Committee of the Scottish parliament saying, "While the Scottish budget has been cut by 5 percent local government budget have been cut by 11 percent. Of the 31,000 jobs cut (allowing for transfers) in the devolved public sector, a staggering 87 per cent have been in local government."

Unison report that the councils have said that 7,000 jobs have been lost as a direct result of the £350 million cuts to their budgets by the Scottish government last year alone.

Unison's refusal to make the slightest effort to use its enormous resources to mobilise the broad support that exists for both groups of workers within the working class is opening up the janitors and IT staff to new assaults.

GCC appears intent on turning to strike breaking in the IT workers' dispute. According to Unison, striking workers began receiving emails from recruitment

agencies, which were advertising their own jobs, with identical job specifications. In December, GCC Chief Executive Annemarie O'Donnell is reported to have sent an email to council staff saying that just 39 workers striking "could have a severe impact on our ability to deliver our services," pointing to the crisis the strike had the potential to create for GCC. The IT staff deliver highly specialised services, supporting areas of GCC's critical business and their roles cannot be covered by other non-specialist local authority workers.

Scottish National Party MPs in Westminster submitted an early day motion for GCC to "desist from hiring agency workers to replace their own workforce on strike." The SNP motion is pure hypocrisy, entirely bound up with their ever-closer relations with the trade union bureaucracy and their aspirations to replace the Labour Party at GCC in this year's local authority elections.

In Edinburgh City Council (ECC), which the SNP runs jointly with the Labour Party, the council has come to the very same privatisation arrangement GCC is seeking. ECC outsourced its IT services to the CGI Group, Inc. back in August for £186 million over seven years. GCC are currently seeking to reach terms with CGI Group. Currently, GCC has a partly outsourced deal with Serco, the private conglomerate that specialises in providing services to councils and other public sector bodies.

If GCC has advertised the jobs of striking workers, they are breaking a law created in 1973, now contained in Regulation 7 of the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations 2003.

Successive UK governments, in pursuing ever more restrictive anti-trade union and anti-strike laws, have sought to abolish this regulation over the course of decades. However, resistance from workers has so far prevented this. For their part the trade unions and their SNP and Labour allies insist they can be relied on to suppress workers' interests and that additional, punitive, anti-union laws are unnecessary.

The strikes at Glasgow City Council reveal again the role of the trade unions and Labour as tools of the corporate elite, while the SNP are coming to be understood by broader layers of workers as the pro-big business party they are. There can be no illusion in the ability of these bankrupt organisations to in any way

represent workers in the face of ongoing and increasingly vicious attacks on their lives and the lives of the most vulnerable in Glasgow.

Workers must turn to the building of new workplace committees, independent of the trade unions, to launch a bold and energetic campaign to defend jobs, working conditions and communities from the ravages of austerity. This fight must be centred on uniting with workers throughout Britain who face the same attacks.



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