

Thousands of workers in Glasgow plan strike for equal pay

Steve James
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Eight thousand poorly paid, mostly women workers are due to strike October 23 and 24 in a long-running dispute with Glasgow City Council (GCC) and its care services agency, Cordia.

The strike, the largest strike for equal pay since the 1970 Equal Pay Act, follows 98 percent and 99 percent majority votes by members of the Unison and GMB trade unions.

The workers are seeking millions of pounds in wages, bonuses and overtime payments dating as far back as 2005. Today's action follows a decade in which GCC, at the behest of the Labour Party and now the Scottish National Party, has delayed making the payments due to workers as both parties made cuts.

The workers include school support staff, cleaners, catering workers and carers, who have for years been paid less than male workers doing comparable work. In all, as many as 14,000 are affected.

Equal pay legislation was passed in Britain following a 1968 strike at carmaker Ford's huge plant in Dagenham, Essex. Ford re-graded 187 women who sewed car seats as "unskilled," despite grading men doing comparable work as "semi-skilled."

In 1980, the Conservative government legislated for competitive tendering to be introduced into public sector contracts, to transform vital services into revenue streams for private capital. This began decades of assaults on the pay, terms and conditions of all public sector workers. Workers in catering and support services were particularly hit by pay cuts.

By the 1990s, thousands of pay discrimination cases were reaching the courts. Between 1997 and 1999 local authorities throughout the UK reached "single status" agreements with the trade unions, requiring job evaluation exercises to ensure men and women were paid the same rate for similar work.

In response, local authorities of all political stripes sought "cost neutral" solutions—a euphemism for cutting other, often male workers' wages, while selling off public assets or cutting services.

In Leeds in 2009, 600 male city council cleansing workers struck against pay cuts of up to £6,000 annually, imposed under the pretext of pay "equalisation." Refuse collectors who failed to sign a new contract involving pay cuts agreed by the unions—after they isolated their strike—were threatened with the sack. Those remaining faced huge productivity increases.

By 2007, the 32 local authorities in Scotland admitted they faced outlays of up to £560 million in equal pay claims. Across Britain the figure was around £5 billion—an indication of the level of underpayment involved.

The Glasgow dispute stems from a 2007 re-grading known as the Workforce Pay and Benefits Review (WPBR). The exercise, ostensibly aimed at addressing pay inequalities, instead introduced new ones that have been disputed ever since. A bonus protection system, agreed by the trade unions, operated for three years after the 2007 agreement. Scotland's Court of Session ruled against WPBR last year on the basis that the system was discriminatory.

WPBR also introduced "core" and "non-core" pay rates, in which "non-core" rates included extra points for working conditions in jobs predominantly done by men. This was also outlawed in the Court of Session because WPBR made it impossible to compare core and non-core jobs.

Following the court decisions, GCC, since 2017 controlled by the SNP, dropped its legal struggle and since January said it was pursuing "negotiation not litigation." The result has been the same. GCC under

SNP leader Susan Aitken, has decided to impose yet another grading scheme, while the women, who have already been denied pay increases for years, continue to wait for promised compensation.

How much GCC owes its staff is disputed. The city council has not made clear how it intends to raise the huge sums involved, which some estimates put as high as £1 billion. GCC's entire annual budget this year amounts to around £2.25 billion. It faces a financial shortfall of £129 million over the next three years, even after slashing over £102 million from its spending over the last two years. Glasgow is host to some of the most deprived areas in Britain, with its public services in decline for years. In 2010, GCC employed over 24,000 workers, with only 19,440 employed today.

The Labour Party and the SNP are busy blaming each other for the present crisis—with the SNP citing Labour's bitter legacy and Labour blaming the SNP for not honouring its pledges. Both are enemies of the working class. Given the filthy role of local councils, the Labour Party, SNP, and unions nationally, no worker should believe that the GCC under either party will respond to the women workers' legitimate and long delayed claims other than by slashing male workers' wages and conditions, in a policy of divide and rule, and by further destroying vitally needed social services.

Longstanding pay inequalities can only be overcome by fighting to defend all workers' pay and conditions against the employers so that pay is raised to a universal standard rather than lowered.

Such a struggle is inconceivable without a rank-and-file rebellion against the trade union apparatus, which functions as an arm of corporate and local authority management.

Since 2016 the unions have faced rebellions by doctors, lecturers and health workers against the sell-outs carried out by the union bureaucracy. Under these conditions, they have called this week's action to placate anger but also to encourage internecine competition between workers instead of a unified struggle against the GCC. They are assisted by the proponents of identity politics, presenting the fundamental issue as discrimination against women or other minorities by a collective group of "privileged" males.

Union and non-union workers, agency and full-time

staff, male and female workers, young and old, must be united in rank-and-file committees encompassing not just the workforce struggling for decent jobs, wages and working conditions for all but also the communities that depend on the vital social services carried out by council workers. This would cut the ground from under the media's lying campaign blaming care workers for endangering lives and supposedly targeting "vulnerable users" who are the other victims of GCC cuts.

This fight must be based on the socialist strategy, advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, for the reorganisation of society to meet social need not corporate profit.



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