

Thousands strike in Glasgow for equal pay

“The council seem to think they can do what they want and get away with it”

Our reporters
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Over 8,000 low-paid, mostly female care and learning support workers at Glasgow City Council (GCC) and its care services agency, Cordia, struck October 23 and 24 in pursuit of long-standing demands for pay equality.

Most of the city's early years schools and mainstream primary schools, as well as its additional support for learning facilities, were closed in the largest strike over equal pay since the Equal Pay Act of 1970.

Workers maintained picket lines at many of the city's schools, museums, cleansing depots and libraries. In an expression of the wider support for the strikers, male workers at nine cleansing facilities refused to cross picket lines in support of their female colleagues.

On Monday, several thousand workers and supporters marched from Glasgow Green to a rally at George Square. A minute's silence was held at the rally for the hundreds of workers who had passed away since their claims for equal pay were lodged 12 years ago.

On Tuesday, it emerged that GCC solicitor Carole Forrest wrote to the GMB union threatening its leaders under anti-union legislation introduced by the Conservative government in 1992. Forrest demanded that the GMB repudiate wildcat actions and secondary picketing, adding, “If no repudiation is forthcoming, we reserve the right to raise proceedings against the GMB for the losses which we have sustained as a result of this unlawful action and any repetition of it tomorrow.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters talked to strikers about the dispute.

At Glasgow Green, Joyce said, “We've got a very responsible job and we are grossly underpaid. We are not paid equally with our male counterparts. Enough is enough. I am a home carer for Cordia. I have to assist with mobility, toileting, stoma care, catheter care, administering medication, personal care, shopping. We are hoisting people. We are carers looking after the most vulnerable people in society, people with severe dementia. We get £9.88 an hour for that.”

Amanda, a support for learning worker, said the unions became involved in the dispute only after the City Council lost its last legal case last year. “Twelve years ago, they [the GCC] had the opportunity to resolve this when they gave us money to say we weren't paid unfairly. They had the opportunity then to put the

wages up. It went on so long because if I, as an individual person, went to them to say, ‘You haven't paid the money you owe me,’ I have no power. They are the Council and they have the power.

“I feel now they are having to sit up and listen because people have become united. The unions have brought us together now, but 12 years ago they weren't interested, when the money was paid out originally, without a pay rise. The unions didn't push for a pay rise.

“They've come into this only since January, when they [the GCC] lost the last appeal. They've come on board only because Action 4 Equality [led by lawyer Stefan Cross] have pushed it and brought them together. That's the only reason they are making a stand now. Prior to that I feel they let us down, as people who pay union dues every month.”

Asked how the pay claim could be resolved without cutting services, Amanda said, “I don't believe for one minute they don't have a bank account with money sitting in it somewhere, because they knew they were going to have to at some point put something forward... Maybe they will have to get more from the government, or whatever, but they've got money somewhere.

“I don't think it should be something that comes out of people's council tax though, because we are the ones that are paying that and not earning the money. If we had not paid 12 years of council tax, they would have arrested our wages every single month and taken that back, but they are not willing to put the money forward for us.”

At the rally in George Square, Marie, a learning support worker, said, “We work with children with additional support needs. A lot of the time we work one-to-one with these children as opposed to them being in a classroom environment. How much money has the Council wasted trying to fight it? Would not that money have been better spent sorting it out when it happened. It's 12 years down the line now.

“Where we live we don't get anything. They don't clean my streets, they don't empty my bins. We get nothing. The north of the city is very, very deprived. We are treated like scum. But yet they are out resurfacing the road to make it smooth where they are filming [scenes for the next *Fast and Furious* movie].

“If they wanted to find the money they could have found it. I know things are tight, but stop the biscuits, stop the taxis in the city chambers. Cut the budget there, not on schools... That money

could go somewhere better.”

At a picket line in the Maryhill district, Eileen said her job “involves personal care to wash and dress a client.” She continued: “We use equipment to transfer clients from their bed to a chair. We feed them, we can do assisted feeding. We do stoma care, catheter care, medication administration. We do a lot more than when I started 23 years ago. The work has just been piled on over the years as we have taken work away from district nurses.

“It is a disgrace that this has dragged on so long... none of us wanted this strike. We don't want to leave our vulnerable clients and we certainly don't want to lose over £200 in wages just before Christmas. I left my clients on Tuesday night and they were saying, ‘Just go and do what's right for yourselves. You need to stand up for your rights as women.’”

Mark said, “When you work more than 37 hours you get a special rate. As home carers under Cordia, we lost all that. You've got women in Cordia who had a 20-hour-a-week contract. If, say, they actually worked 50 hours a week, they gave them another contract. So, they still did not qualify for the 37-hour rule, as the additional contract was still less than 37 hours.

“Cordia has been taken back under council control because they were a sham. I've been under Social Work, directed care and now Cordia. Cordia has been taken back under Glasgow City Council, where we were 24 years ago.

“When they created arms-length companies [ALEOS—stand-alone, privatized outfits running council services], they thought they could run care as a private entity, as you have seen through the whole of Britain. These private care entities are now starting to collapse because there is no profit in it. They've tried to make a profit out of us, and in doing that they have cut down our times with clients, which has been reduced and reduced to a breaking point. We are exhausted, we are stressed, and we feel we are not being treated like every other council worker.

“We won the court case. We were dragged through the courts... The simple fact is that we were in court for 12 years and we won that we were entitled to equal pay only last year. We know we were entitled to equal pay, but we had to wait for it to go through the courts for it to be proven legally.

“It went through the courts because Annmarie O'Donnell [GCC chief executive] and Carole Forrest advised the Council that they didn't need to pay us. They have dragged us through the courts and paid millions of pounds in legal fees. The Council seem to think they can do what they want and get away with it.”

Workers who are entitled to an upgrade in pay have not been told how much they can expect. Eileen said, “We don't know how much we are owed individually. The Council have been asked that and they have said they don't know.”

Mark said, “The only confidence I have is that they [the GCC] are going to make us an offer in December, like they did in 2005, and the biggest majority [of workers] are going to refuse it.”

Eileen explained that the strike was demanded by rank-and-file workers by a large majority. “They keep saying in the press that they don't understand why we are striking, and they are blaming the unions for this. But we did this. We demanded a ballot.”

Mark said, “Why should the Council not be paying for decades to come [for the unpaid wages]? The previous [Labour] Council

used PPP [public private partnership] and the PFI [private finance initiative] to build schools that we will be paying for the next 50 years. They've got plenty of silver and banqueting stuff. If we can't pay the mortgage we are out on the street, so why should they be treated any different?”

Nadine said that other council workers have supported the strike of the women. “The bin men have stood by us 100 percent, the adult education drivers too at Dawsholm, Sheildhall, Queenslie. They won't cross a picket line. They went to their managers yesterday and said, ‘We won't cross a picket line, but we are willing to do some other work within the yard.’ Management sent them home. They said to us, ‘Listen, you are losing two days, we are losing only one. We are standing by you, keep up the fight.’”

Eileen added, “Yesterday at the rally in the town, people were coming out of shops and restaurants and cheering us on. People were giving us stuff and saying keep up fight. It has to be done for the future.”

Angela pointed out that a “truck driver spoke to us who is a Unite member. He wanted to strike too, but they haven't even been balloted. He is disgusted with them.”

WSWS reporters explained that for decades in every previous major dispute, the unions have organised sellouts, and that what was required was the building of new rank-and-file organisations.

Eileen responded, “What the unions will maybe realise in the coming months is that we won't sit down. If they come back with a silly offer and dangle a carrot in front of us because it's December, this won't be accepted. The unions will be told that they need to fight for us. This is going to go on until it's settled properly for all of us.”

Mark said, “They underestimated the numbers that were going to turn out at yesterday's rally. We are not naïve. We know what the unions have done, what Labour did and what the SNP [Scottish National Party] is doing.”

Nadine called on other workers to support their struggle, stating, “We need to stand up and fight for this. It's good this is being reported worldwide. We are fighting for our children and if we can do it, you can too.”



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