

# UK: SNP-led Glasgow City Council uses gender politics and threats of blacklisting to isolate equal pay struggle

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The Scottish National Party (SNP)-led executive is stepping up efforts to oppose demands for higher pay following last month's industrial action by 8,000 low-paid, predominantly female public sector workers. They are striking against Glasgow City Council (GCC) and its care services agency, Cordia.

The dispute stems from the 2007 Workforce Pay and Benefits Review (WPBR), a convoluted pay grading system introduced by the former Labour administration, ostensibly to eradicate income inequalities for underpaid and highly exploited female-dominated jobs in home care, catering, cleaning and school support staff.

Last year and in subsequent rulings, the Court of Session, Scotland's supreme civil court, judged the WPBR to be discriminatory in line with 1970 Equal Pay Act. This was due to its inclusion of a three-year bonus protection scheme and a points system topping up core pay for difficult working conditions, which have favoured male-dominated jobs such as construction and refuse collection.

The 14,000 workers affected are now seeking back payment of underpaid wages, bonuses, and overtime payments worth upward of £500 million—more than £35,000 per employee.

The major parties, together with the trade unions and the capitalist media, have presented the dispute solely in terms of “institutionalized” gender discrimination and “sexism at work” to divide men and women workers and obscure the fundamental class issues at stake.

The *Daily Record*, a Glasgow-based tabloid aligned with the Labour Party, made pains to present the strike as an extension of the #MeToo campaign—a movement of self-appointed, multi-millionaire “feminists” who have utilized accusations of sexual harassment to advance their already considerable wealth and careers in Hollywood,

corporate boardrooms and politics.

The aim of this campaign is to isolate women workers from the broader opposition in the working class to the generalized assault on public services and living standards. The gulf separating the identity politics of the upper middle class and the interests of the working class was immediately exposed when the city's entire refuse and street cleaning workforce of 600, mostly men, refused to cross picket lines last month in support of their female colleagues.

While female-dominated jobs have been hit hard by austerity, they are by no means alone. Earlier this year, refuse collectors were engaged in a dispute over 12 percent budget cuts and plans to lay off 130 staff employed on temporary contracts under the city's Community Safety Glasgow homelessness support initiative. Janitors were involved in a long-running equal pay dispute in 2016-17 over Cordia's refusal to grant Working Context and Demands Payments for jobs involving physically demanding and unpleasant working conditions.

Just days after last month's equal pay strike, tens of thousands of teachers from across Scotland marched through Glasgow City Centre against pay cuts of nearly one-quarter over the past decade.

Local government workers across Scotland's 32 local authorities also recently voted down a derisory pay offer of 3 percent by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). “Consultative ballots” organised by the Unison Scotland, Unite and GMB unions revealed high levels of support for industrial action among council workers who have seen their real wages eroded by 15 percent over the past decade.

The groundwork for the continual assault on the jobs, wages and conditions of GCC employees was laid by the

previous Labour administration, which outsourced nearly all in-house services in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, placing them under the responsibility of 10 arm's length external organisations (ALEOs).

Cordia, for instance, was given charity status and tasked with delivering care, education support and janitorial services. The new SNP leadership has now brought Cordia back in-house, together with the policing ALEO, Community Safety Glasgow, as a sop to popular disgust over the explosion of executive pay and the deterioration of public services.

The total GCC workforce has been slashed by 4,500 to 19,440 since 2010, with the remaining workforce saddled with higher workloads and inferior pay. In contrast, the remuneration ALEO executives and GCC departmental chiefs has risen to that of corporate executives. Between 2015/16 and 2016/17 the total remuneration of senior employees at these wholly owned subsidiaries of GCC increased by 12.8 percent to £1,032,787. The combined salaries of nine senior in-house GCC departmental executives exploded by more than 20 percent to £1,147,154 in the same period.

A comparable picture of social desperation and yawning inequality faces workers across Scotland's 32 local authorities, which have borne the brunt of the austerity measures enforced by the devolved SNP government. This has not been altered in slightest since SNP-leader Nicola Sturgeon became Scotland's first female First Minister in 2014. While championing gender quotas for well-paid positions in the Scottish Parliament, public sector management and corporate boardrooms, Sturgeon has overseen cuts of more than £700 million to local services.

From 2017 these cuts have been overseen directly by a minority SNP administration in Glasgow, headed by Councillor Susan Aitkin, after the nationalists brought an end to a discredited Labour Party's 37-year reign. Having tabled a further £130 million of spending cuts over the next three years, Aitkin is seeking to ensure that the costs of any equal pay settlement are minimized and clawed back through further cuts to public services and the sale of public assets.

The efforts by council workers to break out of the narrow gender-based confines of the struggle imposed by the GCC and the trade unions has been met with undiluted class hatred by the nationalists. After initially threatening to prosecute solidarity strikers under Thatcherite anti-strike laws, the SNP administration has insisted that "unlawful" strikers are docked two days' wages. Aitkin

has also expressed support for blacklisting threats by management at Eastbank Academy, a Glasgow Secondary School, where a striking supply teacher, Victoria Wainwright, was told she "would not get another job in Glasgow" after refusing to cross the picket line.

"My understanding is that the teacher in question (Ms. Wainwright) was a supply teacher and ... schools are entitled to make a judgment on which supply teachers they do and do not employ," she told a recent council meeting.

Desperate to contain the struggle to the issue of gender and prevent action spreading, Aitkin urged, "It's crucial that we don't lose sight of why we're doing this. The pay and grading system does discriminate against women."

The trade union bureaucracy has dutifully echoed this line, with Unison Scotland stating after the resumption of talks over the equal pay claims, "No-one wants a repetition of what has happened this week."

No further industrial action is currently planned or in preparation. Glasgow City Unison's Facebook page merely states that "further action is not ruled out."

The GMB addressed a letter to council leaders reassuring them, "We do not want this to get out of control." Regional organizer Rhea Wolfson informed the press that it was a matter of "conscience" for individual workers whether they choose to cross pickets, while insisting, "It hasn't been encouraged by the GMB."

Wolfson, a Labour Party candidate for the constituency of Livingston, has solidarized herself with a filthy campaign in the Scottish media, which has attempted to blackguard refuse workers and street cleaners as a privileged stratum of "male" workers while absurdly denouncing their calls for strike pay as discrimination against women. She told the *Glasgow Evening Times*, "We know there is no free pass when it comes to industrial action and workers acting in solidarity with their fellow members—and we would not support anything that is unfair or discriminatory."



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