

GMB reinstates strike action by Glasgow refuse and street cleansing workers as anger grows at pay offer promoted by the unions

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4 November 2021

The GMB union reinstated the strike action by hundreds of refuse and cleansing workers at Glasgow City Council (GCC) over low pay, coinciding with the first week of the COP26 conference being held in Scotland's largest city.

Last Friday, the GMB suspended the strike voted for on a 96.9 percent mandate only three days before it was due to begin. The GMB, Unite and Unison also suspended strike action scheduled for the second week of the climate conference, which would have led to a five day walkout by thousands of council workers across half of Scotland's local authorities.

The speed with which all the trade unions moved to turn Scotland into a strike free zone during COP26 thoroughly exposes their claim, backed by the pseudo-left groups, that they would use the opportunity to escalate the fight for a decent pay award against the local authorities and Scottish National Party (SNP) government which has dragged on throughout the year.

The pretext for this move was the revised pay offer tabled by COSLA, the umbrella group of local authorities, which the unions agreed to put to their membership across Scotland. This stab in the back makes a mockery of their claim to be fighting for an uplift of £2,000 a year or 6 percent increase for all pay grades.

The revised offer constitutes no genuine improvement on COSLA's previous offer. The headline figure of 5.8 percent cited throughout the media is based only on backdating the uplift of 4.72 percent or 3.43 percent (depending on salary) to January. It is based on the flat rate increase for the entire year from the previous £850 to £1,062. This is all smoke and mirrors. The COSLA proposals stipulate, "While it is acknowledged that the backdating element of the increase is non-recurring it equates to a 5.89% increase..."

Even this meagre increase applies only to the lowest

paid workers earning less than £25,000 a year. COSLA insultingly boasts that the offer is generous because it would bring hourly wages for the lowest paid to £9.78 an hour, a princely 28 pence above the Living Wage. For those earning £25,000 to £40,000 a year there was the same 2 percent uplift, well below the current inflation rate of 5 percent. For those above these pay grades it declines to 1 percent and for the highest paid a lump sum of £800.

The GMB has stated officially that the reason the strike action was reinstated among refuse and cleansing workers at GCC was because it had not been provided sufficient time to consult with its membership. This claim is risible. The GMB was seeking to railroad workers in accepting a rotten deal without being able to scrutinise its contents while the union claimed that their demands had been met.

Drew Duffy of GMB Scotland stated, "We have been trying to get a negotiated settlement on this for 10 months now and got nowhere and it has taken COP26, it's taken the international world and it's taken the refuse workers of Glasgow through their social media campaign, the pressure they've put on to actually force politicians to finally recognise the work they do."

The sole reason why the GMB reinstated the strike was because they knew the proposals they were promoting would be rejected and they might lose control of the workers.

The GMB pleaded with the council for the union to have time to hold a mass meeting over the weekend and possibly Monday to consult with their membership. This would have been used to justify the no-strike agreement and hopefully soften up workers to accept the derisory offer. The SNP council rejected this proposal out of concern that the union bureaucracy would face mass opposition and attempted to seek a legal injunction against the strike, which was unsuccessful.

Even after this the GMB met with the council as late as Sunday, with GMB Scotland Secretary Louise Gilmour stating, “We met the council in good faith, offering a clear set of proposals to reset industrial relations and avoid strikes.”

The GMB sought meaningless undertakings from the council to redress years of austerity and cuts, which were flatly rejected.

The strike action has therefore only gone ahead against the concerted efforts of the GMB. There is no shortage of heated rhetoric being expended to cover this up. Chris Mitchell, GMB convenor, has toured the picket lines across the Glasgow depots this week in a single-handed mission to maintain a militant front, claiming the union is saying enough is enough over low pay.

In fact, Mitchell was cited last Friday by the BBC stating that the GMB was not even serious about its official demand and the revised offer was the best deal possible:

“Chris Mitchell, GMB convenor for refuse and cleansing, said the union had asked for a £2,000 flat rate ‘across the board for everybody’, but knew it was ‘not going to be achievable’. He said workers had expected to be offered something in the region of £1,200 to £1,300.”

The trade unions are mounting a damage limitation exercise, amid growing rank-and-file discontent. Unison has become the focus of workers anger for suspending the week-long strike action at GCC involving refuse and school cleaning and catering staff. Unison Glasgow City Branch tried to distance itself from the decision to suspend the strike, stating of the revised offer, “It does nothing to alter the previous offer on a permanent basis with regards to pay going forward. The strikes should have continued.”

It nevertheless defended the decision of the national executive, writing, “However we acknowledge the national union committee’s democratic right to take the decision they have, no matter how much the Glasgow branch disagrees.”

This cynical defence of the democratic right of the union tops to defy the wishes of their members provoked more anger. Among the comments posted on the branch Facebook page were:

“So, it’s up to the national union committee are the unions not supposed to be working for their members who pay them faithfully, once again workers laughed at by unions and council.”

“Sold out as usual corrupt as hell”

“What a bloody joke lowest paid and the unions agree

to call off the strike makes my blood boil.”

The strike action across Glasgow this week by refuse and street cleansing workers has been solid, with mass pickets at waste depots at Polmadie, Shieldhall, Queenslie, St Rollox, Anderston, Dawsholm, Bridgeton, and Blochairn.

The biggest danger to their continued resistance is posed by the demobilisation of the opposition by the GMB, which is balloting workers on the revised offer after heralding it as a significant breakthrough. Throughout Scotland the GMB, Unite and Unison are following a similar path among the 200,000 local government workers they are balloting over the revised offer, having prevented the first Scotland wide council strike in a decade.

Local government workers in Glasgow and throughout Scotland should reject this derisory offer and take the fight out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. This must be unified with transport workers on the buses and rail at Stagecoach and ScotRail, who have seen their strike mandates overturned in favour of below-inflation pay offers.

The interests of workers cannot be reconciled with organisations that are unions in name only and are dedicated to suppressing the class struggle against the corporate oligarchy and the entire political set up upholding its interests. The unification of these struggles requires the formation of rank-and-file committees, to combine the fight for health measures to end the pandemic with the broader fight against social inequality, low pay and exploitation.



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