

Refuse collection workers strike across UK to demand better pay and conditions

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Over 100 refuse collection workers in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, employed by the company Veolia, staged the first of a weekly series of four-hour strikes on Monday.

The strike was originally set for November 1 but suspended at the eleventh hour by the GMB union, which put a below-inflation pay offer to its members. The two-year deal was for a 3 percent pay increase in year one and a further 3 percent in year two. Workers rejected the offer. They had already voted by over 80 percent to take industrial action after rejecting a previous below-inflation pay deal.

The token character of Monday's strike, 6.30am to 10.30am to be held for just one day a week, was indicative of GMB's intent to betray the struggle. Sheffield City Council was justified in announcing that any impact would be "kept to a minimum."

On Wednesday, the GMB was forced to put on a more militant guise, announcing that the workers had voted to "strike permanently", with the union saying Veolia had paid out "vast sums" for agency staff to try and break the action. The *Sheffield Star* reported, "Notice has now been served on the employer that from November 22, workers will strike all day, every day until the dispute is resolved."

The union's intention is to use the intervening period to work out a new sellout deal with the company to prevent an escalation of the dispute. GMB Organiser Lee Parkinson said: "Veolia needs to stop opening the cheque book trying to break this strike using out of town labour and get back to the table to negotiate an end to this dispute. The council can order that now and need to if they want to avoid this battle turning into a war."

Parkinson's rhetoric is belied by his record. Sheffield refuse collection workers last staged a strike over pay for several days in October 2016. On that occasion, strike breakers were ferried first class from Haringey in north London to Sheffield (both then Labour Party-controlled councils) and were housed in one of the city's best hotels.

The GMB refused to organise its vast resources against the scabbing operation. Parkinson said at the time, "What has shocked us is the lengths that Veolia are prepared to go rather than sit down and negotiate a deal. Instead they have chosen to throw more fuel on the fire by bringing this labour in."

The union ensured the strike petered out and pay was kept low, to the point that, by August 2017, the GMB was pleading with Sheffield City Council "to force its major contractor Veolia to pay the living wage" of just £8.45 an hour.

Sheffield City Council is run by the Labour Party and the Green Party in a "co-operative administration". The role of these forces nationally has been to enable corporate giants such as Veolia and Serco to impose intolerable conditions on council workforces while raking in enormous profits.

Veolia's global revenues for the first quarter of this year were €6.807 billion (£5.890 billion). Antoine Frérot, Veolia's chairman and CEO commented, "Veolia is off to a flying start in 2021. In a global context that remains difficult, Veolia has announced an outstanding pace of growth of both revenue and profits..."

In April, the company completed an aggressive takeover of rival Suez Group, monopolizing operations in Spain, the US, Latin America, Australia and the UK. The new Group is expected to generate an annual revenue of €37 billion (£32.1 billion) with 230,000 employees.

Another refuse workers' strike is live in Glasgow. Action began last month, coinciding with the COP26 climate conference being hosted in the city, after the GMB tried and failed to suspend the strike with three days to go. The union was seeking to railroad workers into accepting a rotten deal without being able to scrutinise its contents, but was thwarted by the membership.

As over a week of industrial action ended on Tuesday, Glasgow workers voted on an offer of a claimed 5.8

percent pay rise, and another “14 concessions”, reached between the GMB and the Scottish National Party-run council. On Wednesday, it was announced that the deal had been rejected by the workforce. GMB Scotland senior organiser Keir Greenaway responded, “Our members have demanded a fresh ballot, which could mean a second wave of strikes in the run-up to Christmas.”

Elsewhere, refuse collection workers in Sandwell in the West Midlands, employed by the outsourcing giant Serco, staged repeated strikes during September and October over allegations of bullying by the company. Further action is scheduled through to January.

Two more disputes have been called off in the last few weeks. Refuse workers in the Derbyshire Dales struck during the first half of October after Serco’s refusal to improve on a below inflation pay offer—the company has a £3.1 million per year contract with the council for refuse collections. The strike was ended last week with a new pay deal. The *Ashborne News Telegraph* reports that the offer was in line with inflation but no details have been released. The newspaper adds that at least some of the increase is temporary, funded by a £150,000 top-up given to Serco by the council.

In Brighton and Hove City, refuse workers employed through the council’s CityClean arm held 13 days of industrial action last month to demand a pay increase. The council is run by a minority Green Party administration. The GMB reached an agreement on October 20 to wind up the dispute, just before workers were scheduled to take an additional 30 days of strike action.

No details have emerged about the settlement, with the union stating only that it “will increase pay and end unilateral round changes.” However, the *Brighton Argus* revealed that as part of the settlement Brighton and Hove City Council will scrap only the lowest two tiers of pay for staff.

The GMB is firefighting to prevent a national eruption of the class struggle in a heavily exploited section of the workforce which is now in a powerful position thanks to a tight labour market.

Dozens of councils across England had been forced to suspend refuse collections due to staff sickness or self-isolation. Problems with refuse collection—often related to an inability to safely replace trained drivers with other staff—have been reported in at least 25 council areas including Manchester, Liverpool, Coventry, Stockport, South Oxfordshire, Tower Hamlets and Milton Keynes.

These problems have been exacerbated by the HGV driver shortage, which has resulted in a frenzied poaching

operation by the most powerful companies for control of dwindling numbers of qualified drivers. The *Guardian* recently reported on a potential “Christmas crisis” of refuse collection as refuse lorry drivers leave their jobs in record numbers for the better pay and incentives currently being offered by the labour-hungry supermarkets and food hauliers. A Lancashire council lost almost half its lorry drivers in three months.

Jacob Hayler, executive director of the Environmental Services Association, the trade body representing the UK’s waste management industry, told the paper there is a vacancy rate for driving jobs of around 15 percent among waste contractors. According to the Local Government Association, workforce surveys show refuse collection services in over half of councils which responded in England and Wales are facing disruption due to labour shortages.

These conditions create the potential for a unified offensive to recoup years of lost wages, in the face of punishing inflation. But the struggles of refuse workers against councils of all political stripes, who facilitate the rapacious profit-driven demands of the global corporations, cannot be left in the hands of the trade unions whose only role is to secure the terms of their ongoing exploitation with the minimum degree of disruption.

Workers must set up rank-and-file committee, independent of the unions, based on the fight for workers’ interests not those of the private sector profiteers.



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