Glasgow bin workers reject pay offer as school janitors and care workers prepare to strike

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Waste collection workers in Glasgow have rejected terms put forward by Glasgow City Council (GCC) to attempt to end their ongoing pay struggle. The 1,500 cleansing workers stopped all waste collections across the city for eight days earlier this month during the COP26 environmental conference. Well supported pickets were maintained at all the city's cleansing depots.

75 percent of those voting rejected GCC's offer. Of those, 80 percent voted in favour of further strikes. Workers rejected a 14-point deal specific to Glasgow on top of terms previously agreed by GMB, Unite, Unison with the all-Scotland local authority umbrella, COSLA, covering local government workers in 32 council areas.

After 10 months of cynical pantomime that typifies annual pay rounds, the unions agreed a 5.8 percent pay offer. Excluding backdating, this amounted to a between 3.4 and 4.7 percent pay increase. RPI inflation is currently running at 6 percent, so this amounted to a substantial pay cut. On this basis, the unions called off a planned strike that would have involved up to 200,000 local authority workers across Scotland during COP26. The COSLA proposal was narrowly accepted by 51 percent of GMB local authority members across Scotland earlier this month. Ballots of Unison and Unite members have yet to be declared.

In Glasgow, such was the strength of feeling among low paid bin workers, who have risked their lives throughout the pandemic, that GMB officials were unable to call off the COP26 strikes without consulting workers, fearing they would lose control of the situation.

According to Scottish National Party (SNP) councillor Alan Casey, who was part of GCC's negotiating team, the 14 points agreed by the GMB included overtime to clear the city's streets, and concessions to the union apparatus to "improve workforce relationships, [and] bring the unions more into decision making". The deal also offered to review pay structures of all 10,000 GCC workers paid less than £20,000 annually and proposed some form of "interim arrangement until a new pay and grading scheme is in place."

GCC's terms have been rejected. Despite a clear ballot result, under anti-union laws which the unions have for decades refused to challenge, another ballot is required before any further strike action can take place. This is due to be held in December.

The cleansing dispute is one of several deepening conflicts around GCC, part of the global intensification of the class struggle between workers internationally and the financial oligarchy.

Also in Glasgow, school janitors and cleaning staff, again members of the GMB, voted by 96 percent off a 69 percent turnout to take strike action during the first two weeks of December, affecting 30 secondary schools across the city. The workers are employed by private sector contractor Amey, despite being paid from council budgets. Amey have offered janitors 1.5 percent and cleaners 2 percent pay increases, both significant pay cuts and only half the inadequate offer made to workers directly employed by GCC and other local authorities.

Amey has a 20-year long contract to manage the city's school estate under a deal the company boasts is the largest educational PFI (private finance initiative) in Europe. Although Glasgow is currently run by the SNP,

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the schools deal was arranged by the Labour Party in 2000. Secondary schools were replaced or refurbished under PFI (private finance initiative) or PPP (private public partnership) contracts intended to run for decades and offering a ring-fenced revenue stream for private operators regardless of the increasingly parlous state of local government finances.

In 2016, a series of Freedom of Information requests made by nationalist politician Tommy Sheridan revealed GCC expected to pay around £780 million over the remaining years of its schools contract. Labour also arranged the transfer of GCC's entire housing stock to Glasgow Housing Association, now part of the vast Wheatley Group housing empire. In total, Scottish local authorities expected to pay out £6.4 billion in PPP fees, mostly for school maintenance.

The janitors' dispute highlights the extent to which, in addition to the daily suppression of their struggles by the trade unions, workers are also up against both the SNP and the Scottish Labour Party. Both parties have dominated Scottish political life for decades and are jointly responsible for every assault on local authority workers.

This is underscored by yet another "consultative" ballot whose result was announced last week. The GMB reported 99 percent of its members working in home care, education, social work and the culture and sports arms-length body, Glasgow Life, are willing to take strike action over exclusions and delays arising from a 2019 settlement of equal pay claims stretching back decades.

In 2018, thousands of mostly female care and support workers struck in support of long-standing demands for improved pay in areas of work traditionally dominated by women. The dispute was the largest equal pay strike in Britain since 1970. Male workers at cleansing depots refused to cross picket lines. In 2019, GCC agreed to compensate up to 18,000 workers in a settlement reported to be worth around £500 million.

Thus far, however, according to Action4Equality Scotland, the company formed by lawyer Stephen Cross who represents many of those impacted, some 5,000 workers' claims are outstanding for the period prior to March 2018. As many as 18,000 are due compensation for the period after March 2018. There are also disputes over which categories of workers should be included, while full settlement of existing claims will not be implemented until 2024.

The workers will now be balloted by the GMB, Unite and Unison for industrial action, with a huge majority in favour highly likely.

The three disputes highlight the disunity imposed on workers by the trade unions. While Amey school janitors are scheduled to strike early December, GCC cleansing workers will still only be balloting. Care workers demanding equal pay will not ballot until January. Yet, directly or indirectly, they all work for GCC and are members of the same trade union triumvirate. Routine fragmentation of disputes, even those against the same employer, are the daily operations of the trade unions. No steps to unify these struggles, let alone bring them together with countless others emerging across the UK and Europe, is possible within such committed pro-company and pro-government organisations.

For decades, the trade unions have functioned as the central mechanism for enforcing austerity measures on the working class. Maintaining their members and the broader working class in a state of enforced disunity is central to the union apparatus' wealth, investment portfolios, office space and privileged existence, and expresses their deep integration into the structure and operations of capitalist rule. These are not workers' organisations. They do not unify workers, they divide them.

New organisations are needed to organise a united fightback against the financial oligarchy and its looting of all aspects of social life. Rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and capitalist parties, and led by trusted workers must be established to plan and lead the struggle. This is the perspective championed by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

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