

GMB union promotes below inflation pay deal ending Sheffield UK refuse workers dispute

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30 November 2021

The GMB union announced on November 19 that an agreement had been reached to end the pay dispute with Veolia in Sheffield which is contracted to provide waste management by the Labour/Green run local authority.

The pay award is just 3 percent for this year, less than half the present rate of inflation of 6 percent. This will be followed by another below inflation 3.5 percent for 2022. To dress up the sub-standard deal, the pay increase for 2021 will be backdated to May and a one-off payment of £250 (gross) was offered to each worker.

No information has been publicly released on the margin of acceptance in the ballot of around 100 refuse workers. Lee Parkinson, GMB Organiser instead boasted, “GMB members stood together in an act of solidarity to achieve pay justice. They have exercised their democratic right and voted in favour.

“They risked their own health and safety during the pandemic to keep operating a service on behalf of Veolia, and it’s only right that this year’s pay deal goes some way to reflect their efforts over the last 18 months.”

For the GMB “pay justice” is their members receiving a de facto wage cut for two years while Veolia continues to rake in profits, with its global revenues for the first quarter of this year reaching £5.890 billion. Refuse workers did not volunteer to risk their lives during the pandemic, this was the result of union’s failure to ensure their safety. The notion that this rotten agreement represents recognition of their role as key workers in an insult.

The constant re-balloting by the GMB over marginally revised pay offers has nothing to do with the democratic process. It is aimed at wearing down resistance, with the union not presenting any demand of

its own opposed to the multi-billion-pound company.

The original vote for strike action was backed by 80 percent, rejecting the first below inflation offer. From the outset the GMB limited the strike to an ineffectual four-hour stoppage scheduled to start from November 1. This was suspended to table a revised 3 percent offer for 2021 and the same for the following year.

This was again rejected, with the first four-hour stoppage eventually taking place on November 8. Sheffield refuse workers then voted for indefinite strike action from November 22, after Veolia brought in agency staff to undermine the industrial action.

The GMB then suspended all strike action before the next 4 hour walk out on November 15 to push the deal based upon an improvement of 0.5 percent revised pay offer already rejected.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned workers that the GMB would use the period between the first stoppage and the follow up action to negotiate a sell-out.

Parkinson was presenting a militant face, claiming to take on the strike breaking operations of Veolia. But the company did not have to rely on scabbing to break the strike, as it could rely on the GMB. It has proved a far more effective weapon against workers resistance.

The sellout in Sheffield is in line with the GMB’s tole in curbing rising opposition across the UK among refuse workers. A combination of low wages and intolerable working conditions, and infection or self-isolation due to the pandemic, has led to a major shortage of refuse workers, particularly drivers.

Workers have sought to turn this labour shortage to their advantage through industrial action to reverse their poor terms and conditions and low wages. However, this militancy has come up against the corporatist relations of the GMB with local authorities

of every political stripe and the private operators. The critical infrastructure of waste management has been turned over to the maximisation of profit by the private sector, or cut to the bone by those still operated by a local authority.

In October the GMB ended two major disputes.

Around 34 HGV drivers in Brighton and Hove took 13 days of strike action over pay and the constant changing of their rounds without consultation or notice against Cityclean, the council's waste department. The local authority is run by a minority Green Party administration. The dispute was ended after an agreement was reached prior to another 30 days of strike action. The GMB has not commented publicly on the details of the agreement, stating only that it "increased pay" and ended unilateral changes to scheduling.

In the Derbyshire Dales, around 40 refuse workers took two days of strike action against private operator Serco over pay and management treating workers as "just legs and arms". The deal to end the dispute has been described by the GMB as "in line with inflation". It has been reported in the media that the topping up of refuse workers low pay has come via a subsidy provided by the Conservative council to Serco of £150,000.

In Scotland, around 1,500 refuse workers remain locked in a fight with the Scottish National Party-run Glasgow City Council. An eight-day strike went ahead in the first week of November during the COP26 summit, hosted in the city, after the GMB attempted to suspend action. This was to table a revised below inflation pay offer from the Scotland wide local authorities' body, COSLA, which served as a pretext for the GMB, Unite and Unison to suspend strike action by up to 200,000 council workers across the country the following week. The vote to accept the offer in the ballot held by the GMB passed with the narrowest of margins, 51 percent.

In addition to saddling their membership across Scotland with a de facto pay cut, the GMB successfully isolated the Glasgow strikers. The Glasgow workers voted by a majority of 75 percent to reject acceptance of a 14 point plan by the council to end the dispute, on top of the terms agreed by the GMB and other unions to sellout the pay fight across 32 authorities. A majority of 80 percent of those who voted to reject the proposals

also voted for strike action, but this will be delayed further as the GMB organises another ballot in compliance with anti-strike legislation.

In Sandwell in the West Midlands the GMB has suspended 12 days of strike action over safety during the Christmas period against Serco by more than a 100 refuse workers at the Household Recycling Centre. The suspension took place on the first day of the walkout on November 15 following "emergency talks" with the company.

Sandwell Serco workers mounted repeated strikes in September and October over allegations of management bullying. GMB organiser Justine Jones described the suspension of strike action as "a gesture of good faith." The 12 days of rolling stoppages had been dubbed "strike-mas" by the GMB. Jones had described the site as a "death trap" for workers and the public in a press release at the end of October. This cited a list of grievances including lack of handwashing facilities, overflowing toilets and inadequate personal protective equipment.

Behind its empty posture of opposition, the GMB is opposed to any militant opposition which brings workers into conflict with a political set-up which serves the interests of the corporate oligarchy such as Veolia and Serco. Refuse workers require the formation of rank and file committees to mobilise their strength as one social force against these vested interests.



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