

Labour-run Coventry council mount strikebreaking operation against bin workers

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Labour Party controlled Coventry City Council is organising a massive strikebreaking operation against bin workers seeking a pay rise.

Around 70 refuse truck drivers have held 10 days of strikes over December and January following a near unanimous vote for action by the Unite union members.

A 48-hour strike was held at the beginning of January, followed by a four-day walkout from January 11 and strikes on January 26 and 28. These are on top of an overtime ban. From January 31, the drivers will strike for five days a week for the next two months, collecting no bins in the city.

The drivers are paid between £11.49 and £14.37 an hour and are calling for an uplift to £14 and £17 an hour. This week Unite published a photo on Twitter showing a recent monthly pay slip for a Coventry refuse worker that equated to a year's pay of around just £22,600 *before tax*.

Money is no object when it comes to its strikebreaking operation. The council has refused to meet the demand for a pay raise without concessions, with inflation running at over 7 percent. But Labour hire agency RFE Recruitment has offered to pay an hourly rate of £18 an hour during weekdays and a £19 to £20 rate for weekends to recruit for the scabbing operation. The council has already organised 11 drop-off points across the city for refuse collection, with sites patrolled by hired security staff.

Tom White Waste has been contracted to operate refuse collection on behalf of Coventry council, with a fleet of 60 vehicles. It describes itself as a family-run business for the past 40 years. However, it is wholly owned by the council. Coventry council acquired Tom White Waste in March 2020, describing it as an “arms-length commercial investment.” The company had held a contract to deal with Coventry's recyclable waste since 2009.

A March 9, 2020, article on the letsrecycle.com website explained, “Purchasing the business can be done at low cost by the council because the shares count as capital

expenditure and the authority can fund this through prudential borrowing.”

Local sources put the sale price at £14.5 million. The article quoted the local authority saying the purchase “will realise significant service benefits as well as provide a forecast financial return to the Council over time...” At the time of the purchase the council appointed three senior officers as directors to run the company.

The Coventry bin dispute lays bare the real nature of the Labour Party and its hostility to the working class. The Labour council is organising a scabbing operation that no council run by the Conservatives has so far attempted throughout the pandemic.

The mantra of living with the pandemic saw the removal last week of all remaining public health restrictions, supported by Labour with no opposition from the trade unions, as infections and deaths mount. As the Coventry dispute shows, the working class is also being made to pay for the Tory bailout of the major corporations through stepped-up exploitation.

The struggle has come to a head in Coventry only because attempts to demobilise opposition by Unite proved unsuccessful. In December, the union attempted to curtail strike action by Coventry drivers based on alternating one-hour stoppages throughout the shift, according to a Unite press release.

The December 15 press release noted, “The council is also trying to make last minute changes to the refuse workers' contracts, via a buy-out option that would make working over the Christmas period compulsory, when for the previous 20 years this has been covered on a voluntary basis.”

Even this token stop-start strike was deemed beyond the pale by the Labour authority. A localgov website article December 15 quoted Coventry Council director of Streetscene and Regulatory Services, Andrew Walster, saying, “While we respect the democratic right of union

members to take strike action, the proposals they had put forward were not acceptable.

“The chaos it would have caused means that we have taken the decision to tell the drivers not to work at all during the days they intend to strike. The bin collectors—who are not on strike—will be allocated to other roles on those days and I’d like to thank them for the ongoing help and understanding.”

The planned December 21 strike did not go ahead. A December 17 *Coventry Telegraph* article noted that “the council announced on Thursday (16 December) via its website and social media channels a Christmas refuse crisis had been averted after union Unite announced plans to push the strike back to January.”

The same article quoted a Unite spokesperson saying, “Following an improved offer from Coventry council the bin strikes planned for next week have been suspended. This allows time for our members to be fully consulted on the offer that has been made. The strikes scheduled to begin on Wednesday 5 January remains scheduled to go ahead.”

Unite is doing everything to isolate and end the dispute. The strike involves only drivers and *not bin collectors* working alongside them, despite Unite declaring that those workers are also lowly paid.

According to a BBC report January 28, negotiations between Unite and management are ongoing and “the dispute has now been taken to Acas for arbitration.”

Unite is presenting itself as the mechanism through which strike action can be halted. Speaking on the picket line on January 27, Frank Keogh, Unite’s regional co-ordinating officer, said, “Our members are ready to go back to work as soon as you put a good offer on the table for us.” He told BBC’s Politics Midlands on Sunday that the union could rapidly intervene to get the upcoming all-out strikes called off. “If an offer is made to Unite, we can put that offer to our members before Monday and if our members accept that offer the strike action could be withheld.” The amount being paid to strikebreakers by the council “is in excess of what would settle this dispute.”

The dispute in Coventry is the highest expression of an offensive by councils of all political stripes, allied with private company management, against workers throughout the sector. A January 6 article on letsrecycle noted that “average salary” for a “refuse collection driver in the UK is £24,713. This rises to around £26,000 in London. For crew members, this falls to an average of £20,261, and £22,788 in London.”

In recent weeks, bitter disputes by refuse workers have

been held against Glasgow council (Scottish National Party-run), Brighton (minority Green Party), Derbyshire Dales (Conservative), Sheffield (Labour/Greens), Sandwell (Labour), Bexley (Conservative) and Eastbourne (Liberal Democrat). Bin workers at Conservative-run Wiltshire council are currently balloting to strike after Hills Waste Solutions in Trowbridge, Salisbury and Calne offered a well below inflation 2 percent pay deal.

The union bureaucracy is fully aware that they are sitting on a powder keg. Letsrecycle notes, “A shortage of drivers, increased work throughout the pandemic, and a rise in inflation have combined to cause a ‘perfect storm’ which could lead to more refuse strikes in 2022, the GMB Union has warned.”

These struggles against the deep-going privatisation of all public services and the running down of workers’ pay, terms and conditions could spearhead a struggle by millions of other public sector workers but they are being systematically isolated and betrayed by the union bureaucracy. The Letsrecycle article quotes the GMB that recent refuse workers strikes point to workers “realising their worth and flexing their industrial muscle,” but notes that “the union has not undertaken ‘a coordinated approach’ to target the waste and recycling sector.”

To take forward their fight, workers in Coventry must establish a rank-and-file committee, independent of Unite, and turn to bin collectors and other council workers also under attack. On this basis a successful co-ordinated fightback can be organised on based on the fight for workers’ interests, not those of the council and their private sector partner profiteers.



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