

Unite tries to corral opposition to Labour's strike breaking against Coventry bin workers

Tony Robson
11 February 2022

Unite held an online Facebook rally Wednesday to support striking Coventry bin workers confronting an orchestrated scabbing operation by the Labour controlled local authority.

General Secretary Sharon Graham, the featured speaker, threatened to consider withdrawing the union's funding to the Labour Party. But this was a belated and insincere attempt to placate the 70 refuse drivers faced with a scabbing operation and to head off a broader rebellion by the working class against the combined policing operation of the class struggle by the Labour Party and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy.

The pay strike at Coventry began early last month and was escalated on January 31 to five days a week until March. In response Coventry City Council has put into effect an openly prepared strike-breaking operation which no Tory-run council has attempted to mount. It is using Tom White Waste to operate the make-shift service, which is an arms-length commercial investment wholly owned by the Labour authority who handed over its own refuse trucks for use against the strike.

After over a week of inaction to oppose this frontal assault, Graham was wheeled out to restore Unite's standing among angry workers. The online rally was addressed by three strikers from the Whitley Road council yard who spoke to the intolerable conditions and low pay they confront. As Teresa explained, "If they think we are going to break us, no we are strong." She added that coming from abroad she had never experienced such treatment before and expressed her disgust with the Labour council.

Graham's claim that the "full weight of Unite" is behind the fight of the Coventry bin workers is risible. Unite has given the red-carpet treatment to Labour MPs

and councillors on every picket line as supposed allies of workers in struggle. The largest private sector union with a membership over a million has not lifted a finger to mobilise workers in defence of the refuse drivers. It cannot even organise a joint struggle of bin workers in the same council yard, leaving carriers (bin collectors) to face threats of disciplinary action for refusing to work alongside the scab workforce.

What passed for condemnations of Labour by Graham was bluster designed to cover for the union's role in isolating the struggle. The words "strike-breaking" never passed her lips. While claiming that she was placing a "stake in the ground," Unite has continually met with the Labour authority for talks as it spearheads a scabbing operation. The union's political cringing was summed up by the chair of Unite West Midlands, Asif Mohammed, who stated that all workers wanted was for Coventry City Council to "do the right thing."

The centre piece of Graham's oppositional pose against Labour was the threat to withdraw political funding. But she said nothing more than the funding question was now "under review." In reference to a Labour authority prepared to spend more money on strike-breaking than meeting the pay demands of refuse drivers, Graham declared, "I say both to the Labour council and the Labour Party, you talk a lot about unity, well now we need action not words." This was followed up by the invocation, "It's time to act like Labour, be the party for workers."

Graham's attempt to barter with Labour using its considerable financial influence as its single largest donor backfired. A party spokesperson countered, "These sort of threats won't work in Keir Starmer's Labour Party."

This was immediately followed by an exclusive

interview with the BBC's Laura Kuennsberg with Starmer, given priority even as he prepared to fly to meet NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg to discuss military threats against Russia. Starmer told Kuennsberg, "The Labour Party I lead is not going to be influenced by threats from anybody, whoever they are, and that is just an absolute matter of principle for me. The merits of individual disputes I can debate all day, up hill and down dale. But I am not going to be challenged and I am not going to be influenced by those who say we'll only provide money if you do 'x'."

Asked if he was concerned about wider unhappiness on the left of his party, Starmer replied, 'What I am concerned with is not so much what our members think but what the public think, as it is the public we need to persuade to vote for us.'

Starmer has no interest whatsoever in the views of "the public." He has backed the Coventry local authority to prove Labour will stop at nothing to crush workers' resistance to austerity.

During the January 31 debate on the scandal surrounding Conservative government lockdown drinks parties, Starmer appealed directly to Tory MPs to remove Prime Minister Boris Johnson, citing Margaret Thatcher's inaugural speech as party leader in 1975 on the necessity of governments to uphold the rule of law. She was in fact mounting an attack on the then Labour government for having "lost its nerve and shed its principles" over the "People's Republic of Clay Cross" and turning "the Shrewsbury pickets into martyrs," as well as exalting the role of the British Army in Northern Ireland.

Clay Cross references 21 Labour councillors surcharged and banned from office for defying a Tory law instructing massive rent hikes—something completely alien to today's party of scab herders. The Shrewsbury pickets were striking building workers, charged by the Tories with over 200 offenses, with six imprisoned, including Des Warren for three years and Ricky Tomlinson for two.

Starmer has underscored his party's readiness to do the same and more against any worker seeking to defend their jobs and livelihoods from the austerity onslaught.

Unite and the rest of Britain's trade unions offer no genuine opposition to Labour. Graham's musings on party funding and a return to non-aligned trade

unionism, framed as a pathetic appeal for "change" from Starmer, are a de facto amnesty while Unite works on the ground to impose a chain of below-inflation pay awards. Unite has been the main mechanism through which a powerful strike movement across the transport, distribution and logistics sectors has been blocked.

As the Socialist Equality Party statement, "The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government" explains, "Workers have confronted sabotage and betrayal by the trade unions. In the process the unions have been widely discredited. They are viewed with disgust by the most advanced sections of militant workers. All over the world, strikes and protests are erupting against the renewed threat from COVID and the decades-long assault on wages and living standards, marking the beginning of an international counter-offensive by the working class. The prolonged suppression of the class struggle by the trade union bureaucracy, the Labour Party and the myriad pseudo-left groups that trail after them is coming to an end—not just in Britain, but all over the world."

In the struggle against the corporations and local authorities imposing de facto pay cuts and speed-ups, the Labour Party is as implacable an enemy of the working class as the Tory government. The trade unions act as a fifth column, deliberately leading every struggle towards defeat behind a blizzard of lying rhetoric. To defend their interests, workers must build an interconnected network of rank-and-file workplace committees to wrest control of the class struggle out of the hands of the pro-capitalist labour bureaucracy and take the fight to the ruling class. This must be based on an anti-capitalist, internationalist, anti-imperialist and socialist perspective to mobilise the working class to reorganise economic life to meet social need not private profit.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)