Defend the Coventry bin workers from Labour's strike-breaking!

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Workers throughout the UK must mobilise in defence of the Coventry bin workers facing a major strike-breaking operation by the Labour Party-controlled authority.

The Labour council has denied around 70 refuse drivers a pay increase in line with recognising their job role as professional Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers. Instead, it spends twice as much hiring a replacement scab workforce mobilised through its wholly owned arms-length company, Tom White Waste.

Through the agency AFE Employment, the untrained drivers on temporary contracts are reported to be paid up to £18 to £26 an hour, compared with council employed refuse truck drivers who have worked throughout the pandemic for between £11 and £14 an hour.

In the face of this frontal assault, Unite, the second largest union in the UK with a membership of more than a million, has organised no solidarity action by its more than a million members. The focus of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham is not defeating the strike-breaking operation but ending the dispute. The union continues to meet regularly with the council for "talks" as the vicious campaign to crush workers resistance enters its third week.

The dispute has now gone beyond the issue of refuse drivers pay. The Labour council is spearheading an attack aimed at all workers, based on an austerity driven agenda imposed by scab herding and accompanied by a vicious media campaign to defame a section of key workers as overpaid.

Unite continues to isolate the Coventry refuse workers to stifle a broader fightback by the working class, offering to engineer a sell-out through talks at the arbitration service, ACAS, that should have been cancelled the moment the first scab refuse truck left the depot.

Unite, along with the GMB and Unison, has forestalled strike action by tens of thousands of local government workers against a derisory 1.75 percent pay offer for 2021/22. Around 70,000 Unite members at 321 local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland voted by a majority of 85 percent in a consultative ballot last October for strike action, which the union is only now putting to a vote.

For all of Graham's moral condemnation of the Labour council, she never directly refers to its actions as strike breaking. Instead Unite foregrounds arguments conducive to the austerity agenda of Labour, that the refuse drivers pay claim would cost £250,000 to settle compared with the £1.8 million estimated to have been spent to defeat the strike.

The threat last Wednesday by Graham to withhold funding from the Labour Party was aimed at applying pressure on the Labour leadership to get the council to row back from its attack. But the appeal for Labour "to be the party of workers" was shot down in flames by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who equated the attempt at applying leverage as "making threats" and solidarised himself with the actions of the council citing the "public interest". In line with Labour's mantra of upholding the national interest, striking workers fighting poverty pay are being set up as the "enemy within" as Margaret Thatcher did against the miners in 1984-85.

Starmer even took time out from his warmongering visit to NATO to endorse the clampdown by the Labour council, demonstrating that the wardrive against Russia will be accompanied by class war at home.

Week after week, Unite has paraded Labour MPs on every picket line including Coventry as standing by workers in struggle, while their party has worked in cahoots with Boris Johnson's Conservative government throughout the pandemic to ensure that corporate profits are prioritised over public health. This has led to one of the highest death tolls per capita in the world of more than 180,000.

Now, while criticising Johnson personally over the

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“partygate” scandal, Starmer reaches out to vicious right-wing Tories to unite behind a shared agenda of ending all remaining COVID-19 emergency health measures, imposing pay restraint on workers facing the biggest cost of living crisis in decades and dispatching troops, fighter jets and warships to eastern Europe.

Unite’s belated pose of opposition to Starmer is a desperate attempt to restore its flagging credibility and that of all Britain’s trade unions. After years of continual betrayals, millions of workers have lost all confidence in the unions. And the efforts of the various pseudo-left groups to prop up these pro-business bureaucracies are having less and less impact. Last Saturday’s Peoples Assembly Against Austerity demonstrations over the cost-of-living crisis barely mustered a few thousand participants across 30 cities, even after the Governor of the Bank of England Andrew Bailey had demanded workers pull their belts in even tighter.

The development of the class struggle will pit workers more directly against the corporatist trade unions, just as surely as it will set them against the Labour Party. Labour acts as an open agent of the employers, while the trade unions leaders are a fifth column, an industrial police force for the employers suppressing strike action and imposing one betrayal after another.

The fact that the Johnson government has until now been spared from a mass strike wave is thanks to the trade unions. Unite under Graham has stood as a rampart against such a development, by isolating and in the main preventing strike action by key sections of workers in transport, distribution and logistics and manufacturing. The balance sheet is one of mainly de facto pay cuts, falsely packaged as victories while confining the occasional above inflation pay deals to key sectors to pre-empt industry-wide action.

This has produced a social catastrophe. The UK’s billionaires saw their wealth increase by 21.7 percent over the last year, an overall rise of £106.5 billion. Figures for 2018-2020 show the wealthiest 10 percent of British households, comprising the upper middle classes and super-rich, now own 43 percent of total wealth. In contrast, the bottom half of the British population held just 9 percent.

Since March 2020, the UK government has spent £368 billion on COVID-19 measures, with £154 billion handed directly to businesses. An incredible £900 billion has been spent by the Bank of England in quantitative easing programmes, pumping money into the stock market to drive up share prices.

Meanwhile, temporary social safety measures including the furlough scheme and £20 a week increase in Universal Credit benefit have been removed as the ruling class demands that the working class picks up the tab for the bailout of big business. According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) pay grew at an annual rate of just 3.5 percent last November, with CPI inflation then at 5.1 percent. The Bank and England forecasts the steepest decline in post-tax wages of 2 percent overall this year, outstripping the 1.4 percent which followed the 2008 financial crash.

To fightback workers must break the grip of the pro-company unions and organise their struggles independently across all sectional and national boundaries. This must be based upon a perspective opposing the subordination of society to the criminal enrichment of the corporate and financial elite.

This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and File Committees (IWA-RFC), which urges workers to build a network of independent, democratic and militant organizations in every factory, school and workplace on an international scale.

A fight against the strike breaking operations of Labour in Coventry would galvanise the deep well of opposition within the working class against this Tory Party Mark II, and the trade unions that act as its frontline mechanisms in sabotaging and suffocating the class struggle and unleash a powerful strike movement against the corporations and the Johnson government. Workers who wish to organise such a fightback should contact the Socialist Equality Party.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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