

UK: Unite will not oppose Labour's strikebreaking operation in Coventry

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4 March 2022

In any struggle, workers must distinguish false friends from genuine allies. This is especially true in the case of the Coventry bin workers, whose dispute has gone beyond the original strike over pay into a direct conflict with the Labour Party.

The Labour-run local authority has mounted a major strikebreaking operation involving an arms-length company wholly owned by the council. A scab replacement workforce has been mobilised via a recruitment agency, with untrained drivers hired on temporary contracts paid nearly twice the hourly rate refuse drivers currently earn.

The Unite union has continued to meet with the council representatives throughout via the ACAS arbitration service, when the only principled position would have been to end all negotiations as soon as the first scab truck left the council yard. While Unite has criticised the fact that no elected councillors have been present during the negotiations, it has maintained these sham talks.

Unite's bluster about solidarity aside, the truth is that the 70 refuse drivers have been left to face this frontal assault alone with no action organised among the union's national membership of more than a million.

Attempting to conceal the isolation of the dispute, Unite organised an online meeting three weeks ago addressed by General Secretary Sharon Graham. Her announcement that Unite was placing its funding of Labour under review over the Coventry dispute grabbed media headlines nationally.

But Graham's claim to speak for the working class against the Labour Party has been disproven by her avoiding any high-profile conflict with Labour since party leader Sir Keir Starmer shot down her appeals to "be the party for workers" and declared, "The Labour Party I lead is not going to be influenced by threats from anybody."

Labour's strikebreaking operation has continued and Graham's references to escalating the dispute "if

necessary" have been shown to be hollow phrases. She made a guest appearance on the Coventry picket line Thursday and stated in a press release that Unite was "ramping up" its campaign. But this only refers to a ballot of the 70 refuse workers to renew their strike mandate.

Graham also referenced the telephone figure salaries shelled out by the Labour authority to its council executives, and their "incompetence" and "greed". Yet Unite has insisted at every stage that the dispute can be settled within the framework of the Labour council's overall austerity agenda and ringfenced from any broader fightback.

In response to Labour council leader George Duggins's claim that the Coventry workers' demands would trigger equal pay claims from other council workers, Unite reassured that it had "learnt the starting rate for refuse collection drivers in Birmingham is over £5,500 above the £22,183 per annum that Coventry drivers earn, a rate that has not triggered equal pay claims."

The same union press release emphasised that the estimated cost of settling the pay claim of Coventry refuse drivers would be £250,000 compared to the £2.9 million spent so far against the industrial action.

Unite presents the dispute as a case of individual pig-headedness to conceal the fact that Coventry's orchestrated attack on refuse drivers spearheads an assault on all council workers.

The union has stalled strike action by 70,000 members across more than 300 local authorities in opposition to a derisory 1.75 percent pay offer by the Local Government Association in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. First, the union organised a non-binding consultative strike ballot which returned an 85 percent vote in favour of action. On Monday, the union announced that a full ballot for strike action had returned a mandate of 82 percent in favour but stated only that strike dates would be "unveiled soon".

With inflation reaching a 30 year high at 7.8 percent RPI, the union has tabled a pay demand it recognises is less than half that required to redress more than a decade of declining wages. “Unite is seeking a 10 percent uplift in pay for council workers who have experienced real terms pay cut of 22 percent over the last 11 years.”

The turn by Labour to open Thatcherite methods of strikebreaking and Unite’s refusal to lift a finger against this has left the labour and trade union bureaucracy exposed, triggering the belated interest of *Guardian* journalist Owen Jones.

His opinion piece, “The case of the Coventry bin-lorry drivers strike should raise a red flag for Labour”, and subsequent video, “The strike taking on the Labour establishment”, veer between an apologia for Labour and an attempt to present Graham and Unite as the sole repository of working-class opposition.

Jones is the last person to offer advice to workers engaged in a struggle, especially one entailing a fight against the Labour Party.

A self-professed admirer of Blairism, he was sympathetic to the right-wing coup attempts launched against former party leader Jeremy Corbyn in 2016, only to proclaim in the wake of the 2017 general election that under his leadership the party had been permanently transformed. The only constants in his political somersaults are his myopic outlook and hostility to a revival of genuine socialist and revolutionary politics in the working class.

The dishonest character of Jones’s investigative journalism is revealed in the level of self-censorship involved. It is no mean feat that he manages to avoid mentioning once the central issue in the Coventry dispute—Labour’s strikebreaking operation.

This is a political amnesty not only for Labour but also for Unite and its isolation of the struggle. In his video chat with Graham, Jones repeats as an article of faith that the union leader has won 49 industrial disputes and aims to make Coventry the next. The image presented of Graham is of a militant workers’ leader rather than a demobiliser-in-chief of a strike wave threatening to engulf the Johnson government since the latter half of last year, engineering a string of below-inflation pay deals and an unprecedented number of cancelled strikes.

What passes for a polemic against Starmer is bogus: “When Starmer was interviewed by a local journalist, he scoffed at the idea a strike in Coventry should ‘influence relations between the Labour party and its trade unions’”. The insinuation was clear—why should a local dispute in

Coventry, of all places, impact national politics? But this is a grave error. The hardship suffered by workers here is being experienced across the country: it is a national issue.”

On the contrary, Starmer’s response was based on a clear recognition that a crackdown on all working-class opposition is a “national issue”, in which Labour will play a leading role. He has stated openly that there must be “economic pain” to fund the war drive by NATO against Russia, accelerating the renewed, bi-partisan austerity agenda underway now that the pandemic has been declared over.

It is not only in Coventry where Labour is rounding on striking workers. London Mayor Sadiq Khan condemned strikes by tube drivers in November for causing widespread disruption. The two-day stoppage on London Underground this week has become the subject of a filthy media witch-hunt denouncing workers striking over loss of pensions and jobs as agents of Vladimir Putin.

Jones’s efforts to put Humpty Dumpty back together again are summed up in his conclusion, “Here is an opportunity for Labour to turn ‘levelling up’ into a phrase of substance by working with the union leaders like Sharon Graham to raise wages and improve working conditions in the UK. What a tragedy to waste it.”

There is nothing to waste, and no “renaissance of trade unions” as claimed by Jones. The emerging wave of workers’ resistance is pitting them just as surely against these moribund, pro-corporate outfits as the Labour Party. This poses the need to build a network of independent rank-and-file committees as genuine organs of class struggle, unifying the international working class on a socialist perspective and leading a frontal assault on capitalism.



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