

# ACAS sides with strike-breaking Coventry Labour council against refuse drivers

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The government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) has upheld Coventry Labour council's insulting pay deal against 70 refuse drivers who have been engaged in an all-out strike since January 31. The members of the Unite union took 10 days of action earlier in the month before the escalation of their dispute.

Last Wednesday, the Labour authority declared that ACAS had ruled the drivers should receive a "Grade 5 salary—which they are already paid."

The refuse drivers have demanded they be moved up a pay scale from Grade 5 to Grade 6 in recognition of their skilled and safety-critical role as HGV2 (fixed body rather than articulated (HGV1) heavy goods vehicles) drivers. Drivers at the Whitley Road depot explained to the WSWS how they were paid between £11.49 and £14.37 an hour on the lower pay grade. Time spent on Grade 5 almost doubled in 2021 from six to 11 years.

A spokesperson for the council stated that the ACAS ruling "further evidences what the council has been saying all along—that it already pays bin lorry drivers a good wage that is one of the highest in the West Midlands." The council was "calling on the strike to be called off immediately".

The Labour authority has waged a media disinformation campaign grossly exaggerating Coventry refuse drivers' wages, claiming they earn up to £52,163 a year and an average of £34,143, as opposed to the basic starting salary of £22,183 many are paid.

The Labourites have mounted a major scabbing operation, hiring a temporary workforce via AFE Employment and deploying an arms-length but wholly council owned waste management company, Tom White Waste Ltd. The authority is paying almost

double the rate currently earned by refuse drivers to this scab replacement workforce, diverting more council funding into the coffers of the private sector.

The protestations of Unite over the ACAS decision in favour of the Labour authority are cynical. The union promoted the lie that ACAS was an impartial body that workers should trust.

Now Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has accused the council of "moving the goals posts" and using "a discredited job evaluation system". But this is what was always on the cards in an arbitration process that is based on management/union co-operation in the suppression of workers' struggles.

Graham has tried to build up a reputation for taking on "bad employers" but Unite did not even demand that Labour halt its strikebreaking operation as a precondition for talks.

This has strengthened the hand of the enemy. On the same day as the ACAS ruling, the council announced that Unite shop steward Peter Randle had been suspended on "gross misconduct" allegations which could result in dismissal. This action against an elected representative of the refuse drivers is aimed at removing all resistance to the council's demand for an end to the dispute.

Unite has a membership of 1.3 million but all it has mustered is an online petition for Randle's reinstatement. A call for solidarity action would win widespread support, but Graham has framed the union's response in terms of avoiding further confrontation.

In Unite's March 15 press release she states, "The council have inflamed the situation by suspending our shop steward on bogus grounds and they turned the opportunity we had to settle the dispute at Acas into a farce."

The union is still maintaining that the council is open to negotiating as it follows up on its strike-breaking action with a witch-hunt.

Coventry refuse drivers voted this week to extend all-out strike action into the summer. To take this struggle forward they need to break from the corporatist agenda of Unite which has isolated their fight and led it down a blind alley.

The constant calls by Unite for a de-escalation have played directly into the hands of the Labour authority. It has deprived refuse drivers of the support a call for wider action would win in the working class, deeply opposed to the Thatcherite methods adopted by Labour and aware that they are next in line.

The union has avoided any direct reference to the scab operation and managed to turn its criticism of the Labour authority into an argument for tighter financial management rather than a defence of workers' rights. A pay settlement for refuse drivers would cost an estimated £300,000, rather than the £2.9 million already spent on strike breaking Unite has argued. It assured the council that a pay uplift for refuse drivers will not trigger pay demands by other council workers.

Unite is living up to this pledge, forestalling strike action by 70,000 members nationally who are demanding increased pay across more than 300 councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Unite has submitted a pay demand of 10 percent, while admitting this is half the amount local government workers have lost during 11 years of a pay freeze. It is avoiding setting strike dates after receiving a mandate for action at the end of last month after the derisory 1.75 percent offer from the Local Government Association was emphatically rejected. It has only announced a week-long strike from next Monday in 11 authorities in Northern Ireland.

Unite is effectively blocking strike action against the austerity agenda across all local authorities on behalf of the Johnson government. Graham has assumed the role of chief industrial fire fighter since her election last August as leader of Unite, the UK's largest private sector union. The list of below-inflation deals she has signed continues to grow among HGV and bus drivers, warehouse and manufacturing workers and more recently outsourced NHS workers.

Unite presents the attack on Coventry refuse drivers as an exceptional case. But in the past weeks refuse

workers have been on strike against pay offers well below inflation in Barrow and Wiltshire and are due to strike for five days from March 28 in nearby Solihull after rejecting a 4.21 per cent offer. These workers are members of the GMB, which along with Unite is salami-slicing a national strike movement against the pay squeeze and intolerable working conditions through local sell-out agreements.

In a further sign that Graham is muting further criticism of Labour, she has pulled back her threat to review union funding of the party, avoiding any further confrontation with Sir Keir Starmer in connection with the Coventry dispute. Starmer aligned himself with the Labour authority in the name of the "public interest" and slapped down her appeals "to be the party for workers." Figures from the Electoral Commission in fact show that since Graham became leader, Unite has increased its affiliation fees to Labour, rising to £750,000 in the last two months of last year compared to £663,122 over the preceding eight months.

In their struggle against the corporations and local authorities' imposing pay cuts and the destruction of terms and conditions, workers face a Labour Party just as hostile to the working class as the Conservative government. The trade unions channel every expression of workers' opposition down a dead end and are equally wedded to the interests of big business and the profit motive.

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.



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