

# Unite isolating Coventry refuse drivers' strike to prevent challenge to Labour Party

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The Coventry refuse drivers' strike is entering its third month. The drivers face a Labour council that has mounted a major scabbing operation to enforce wage restraint.

A rally last weekend demonstrated the gulf between the workers' determination to fight and Unite the union's attempt to curtail any political struggle against Labour.

The drivers have been on all-out strike since January 31, following 10 earlier days of action. They are demanding to be moved up a pay scale in recognition of their skilled and safety-critical role as Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers. Drivers at the Whitley Road depot are paid between £11.49 and £14.37 an hour on the lower pay grade. The progression time to the highest pay grade almost doubled last year, from six to 11 years.

The Labour council has launched a vicious struggle against them. They waged a disinformation campaign about drivers' wages, claiming they earn an average of £34,143, with a top rate of £52,163. The basic starting salary for many is £22,183. One driver showed the WSWS a tax slip showing gross pay of £27,000 but noted that £4,000 of this was contractual overtime.

The disinformation campaign legitimised a major strikebreaking operation. The council hired a temporary workforce via AFE Employment and deployed an arms-length but wholly council-owned waste management company, Tom White Waste Ltd. Agency workers at the scab workforce are paid a higher rate than the striking drivers. The council have spent around £2.8 million on their strikebreaking operation.

The council followed the scabbing operation with the victimisation of Unite union rep Pete Randle on allegations of "gross misconduct." Unite's only response was to petition council leader George Duggins demanding Randle's reinstatement.

Unite, meanwhile, tied the workers to negotiations at government arbitration service ACAS. The union did not

even demand a halt of the scabbing during negotiations. ACAS duly ruled in favour of the council.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham blustered that the council were "moving the goal posts" and using a "discredited job evaluation system," yet this was the predictable outcome of an arbitration process based on management-union cooperation in suppressing workers' struggles. It was the real content of Graham's "back to the workplace" platform for election last year—a corporatist agenda of integrating the union into management structures.

Unite bound workers to this fraudulent process, while making noises about escalating the dispute "if necessary." It has failed to mount any direct challenge to the scabbing operation. The Tom White Waste site has two plants, with the strikebreakers' plant for domestic waste alongside a plant for regular Tom White drivers who collect business waste.

When a small picket of union officials blocked the gates Wednesday morning, no one was more surprised at its effectiveness than the officials. Sean Leahy, chair of Unite's Tom Mann Coventry and Warwickshire branch, said, "We took them by surprise and never expected to stop the wagons—but we did."

This action could have been organised at any time but was not. Two months into the strike Unite is still appealing to Labour to do the right thing.

The workers' resolve is clear, as a 94 percent vote to continue action after their initial strike mandate expired on March 24 demonstrated. Yet, as the strikers' conflict with the Labour Party has deepened, Unite has ever more openly tried to prevent this becoming a political rebellion.

Last Saturday's rally in Coventry was presented as an expression of opposition to the Labour council. Graham was the featured speaker, however, and her remarks highlighted only how far Unite has prevented any wider struggle against Labour.

She had previously announced that Unite would be placing its funding of Labour under review over the Coventry dispute. But Electoral Commission figures showed that Unite increased its affiliation fees to Labour towards the end of last year, up to £750,000 in the last two months of the year against £663,122 over the preceding eight months.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer aligned himself with Coventry council's actions on "public interest" grounds. He had rejected Graham's call for Labour to be "the party for workers," saying, "The Labour Party I lead is not going to be influenced by threats from anybody."

Graham has wound down her calls for reviewing Unite's funding of Labour, but still talked about "ramping up" the Coventry campaign, although this referred only to the ballot for renewing the strike mandate.

Last Saturday, she felt forced to return to the question of funding Labour, but only announced that Coventry's Unite Labour councillors and the council leader would be suspended from Unite "while we investigate your behaviour." Unite, she announced, would not fund Coventry Labour in the forthcoming local elections in May but nothing was said about the party nationally.

Graham's speech was filled with moralising rhetoric declaring the Coventry councillors have "no Labour principles I recognise." She then insisted, "This isn't about left or right... Let's be clear what this dispute is about—it's about pay—pure and simple."

Labour MP Ian Lavery told Saturday's rally that the dispute was *not* about pay but was "an attempt to smash Unite." He compared the situation in Coventry to that at P&O Ferries. His speech on P&O in parliament was on-board with the nationalism of the "Save Britain's Ferries" campaign, with its conclusion, "There's nothing more patriotic than looking after the people in this country in the way they should be looked after."

Coventry council is spearheading a campaign against council workers that is being replicated across the country. Unite members in Cardiff City Council have just voted 98 percent to strike in a dispute over "a widespread bullying culture" in waste services. They are raising health and safety failings, the victimisation of Unite reps, and the misuse of agency labour, where some workers have been on agency contracts for up to 15 years.

Refuse and recycling workers at the North Somerset Environment Company, wholly owned by North Somerset council, have voted to strike against a 1.75 percent pay offer. The workers are members of the GMB, which has

just called off a proposed strike by refuse collectors on the Amey contract at Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, a few miles from Coventry.

The Solihull workers rejected an initial pay offer of 4.21 percent. Amey's revised offer of 5.26 percent was accepted by just over half the workers. RPI inflation currently stands at 8.2 percent. The revised offer means Solihull refuse workers will be paid a minimum of £10 an hour, only 50p above the national minimum wage.

In Adur and Worthing, in Sussex, refuse and recycling workers have extended their strike over a pay deal, begun March 14. The GMB members voted 100 percent on a 90 percent turnout to strike. The council had previously negotiated a pay deal with Unison and is appealing to Trades Union Congress guidelines on disputes between unions to call off the strike.

In Manchester, workers at Biffa, which operates the council's outsourced refuse collection service, are also balloting over low pay. The company is offering the 1.75 percent given to local government workers in 2021. Unite notes that Biffa "is a private company so not bound by the local government pay restraint policy."

The unions are policing any fightback against councils and their contractors, presenting each dispute in isolation and solely in terms of the affordability of local budgets. But in their struggle against pay cuts and the destruction of terms and conditions, workers are facing a Labour Party just as hostile to the working class as the Conservatives.

The unions, equally committed to the interests of big business and the profit system, channel all expressions of workers' opposition into a dead end. Workers must build an interconnected network of rank-and-file workplace committees independent of the pro-capitalist unions that can defend their interests and take the fight to the ruling class.



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