

Pseudo-left cover for Unite in Coventry refuse collectors' strike

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Coventry refuse drivers are about to begin the fourth month of their pay strike against a Labour council that has mounted a major scabbing operation. Their fight has been hobbled by Unite the union's attempts to curtail any political struggle against Labour.

This week, Coventry council were forced to deny preparing to issue 90-day dismissal notices against the 70 strikers, saying "we remain committed to lawfully resolving the issues raised by Unite through negotiation."

After 10 earlier days of action, the drivers began an all-out strike on January 31. They are demanding to be moved up a pay scale recognising 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. Last year, progression time to the highest pay grade almost doubled, from six to 11 years.

The council launched a scabbing operation, hiring a temporary workforce via AFE Employment and deployed an arms-length but council-owned waste management company, Tom White Waste Ltd. The strike-breaking operation has cost more than £2.8 million. Tom White Waste has reported increasing its HGV2 drivers' wages by 12 percent.

Unite mounted no direct challenge to the scabbing operation. It took two months to even to stage a token picket at the Tom White Waste site, which won a response and halted vehicle movement. This emphasised the need for escalation but Unite has tied workers to negotiation at the government arbitration service ACAS without even demanding a halt to the scabbing as a precondition of the talks.

ACAS has ruled in favour of the council, the predictable outcome of an arbitration process based on management-union cooperation in suppressing workers' struggles. This was the real basis of Sharon Graham's "back to the workplace" platform for her election as Unite General

Secretary last year—a corporatist agenda of integrating the union into management structures.

As the conflict between the strikers and the Labour Party has deepened, Unite has worked to prevent it developing into a political rebellion. Graham, backed by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), initially announced that Unite would review its funding of Labour over the Coventry dispute. Yet Unite increased its affiliation fees to Labour last year, up to £750,000 in the last two months of 2021 against £663,122 over the preceding eight months.

Labour nationally supports the scabbing operation by Coventry council. Party leader Sir Keir Starmer rejected Graham's rhetorical call for Labour to be "the party for workers," declaring, "The Labour Party I lead is not going to be influenced by threats from anybody."

Some threats! Graham told a rally earlier this month only that Unite would not fund Coventry Labour in the local elections in May, and that all Coventry's Unite Labour councillors and the council leader would be suspended from the union "while we investigate your behaviour." There was no mention of any action against the national party.

To shore up the union's, "militant" credentials, the SWP's Richard Milner tried to shift responsibility for the ongoing support for Labour onto local bureaucrats. Under the headline "Coventry bin strikers demand more action from regional union leaders," Milner wrote that "a section of the regional bureaucracy seems uncomfortable with a strike against a Labour council, which is seen as disrupting Unite's relationship with Labour."

He counterposed to this the presence "overwhelmingly" of bureaucrats from Unite's organising department, providing a clean bill of health for the union nationally. He goes out of his way to praise Graham for being "clear on saying that the Labour-run council is 'waging war on our union'," and suspending the union's Coventry

councillors—adding only that this is not enough.

If Graham has been forced to countenance a strike against a Labour council, she has worked to keep this from unnecessarily disrupting the union’s wider relationship with Labour. Her main criticism of Coventry’s councillors has been only that they have “no Labour principles I recognise.”

Milner is barely able to mention the major strike-breaking operation, which merits only one direct reference. A second comment about “strike-busting” refers to a legal tribunal launched against the council for the victimisation of Unite union rep Pete Randle on allegations of “gross misconduct.” But Randle’s victimisation was an escalation of the council’s wholesale strike-breaking attack on the entire workforce.

When Graham talks about the council “waging war on our union,” she means Unite’s place at the corporate table in return for suppressing or policing disputes. Milner’s focus on “regional” support and criticism of “regional officials” for supposedly betraying the best intentions of Graham and the national leadership assumes a level of independence that does not exist in practice. If Graham did not agree with her local officials’ actions, she would have no difficulty making clear her opposition. And it would be translated into banner headlines by the SWP et al.

The SWP also disguises the role of Unite in keeping strikes within the same sector regionally separate. There have been waves of disputes nationally among refuse collectors recently, in part triggered by the imposition of a 1.75 percent pay rise cap for local government workers negotiated last year by the National Joint Council (NJC) for Local Government Services.

The NJC comprises 70 members—12 employers’ bodies, and 58 trade unions. Even a year ago, RPI inflation stood at 2.9 percent, making the union-agreed “pay rise” a real-terms cut. RPI is now nine percent.

Workers everywhere are struggling to survive on such “rises,” but all are kept separate from one another. In Rugby, 15 miles from Coventry, Unite members this week began a two-week strike against a 1.75 percent rise. Unite reports some members having to use foodbanks. Refuse workers are amongst those striking at Hackney Council in east London.

Other unions involved are playing a similar role. The GMB is in talks at ACAS after refuse workers at the North Somerset Environment Company rejected a revised pay offer, following the imposition of a 1.75 percent pay deal last year. GMB regional organiser Tim Northover

told the press, “So far every offer has amounted to a real-terms pay cut in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis.” But the GMB is a member of the NJC, and is responsible for that 1.75 percent pay deal.

In Northern Ireland, Unite members have gone on two-week strike against the 1.75 percent pay award, which has been accepted by the GMB and Unison.

The unions are not only responsible for isolating disputes against the same pay restraint, but even strikes at outsourced refuse services provided to councils by private contractors. In Manchester, outsourced refuse service Biffa offered its workers only the 1.75 percent agreed for local government workers. Far from trying to bring workers together, Unite insisted that Biffa “is a private company so not bound by the local government pay restraint policy.”

Unite has now reported that strikes due to begin May 3 in Manchester have been called off after workers accepted a “vastly improved” two-year deal giving the lowest paid a pay increase by over 11 percent and HGV drivers 22 percent. This presumably translates to just 5.5 percent and 11 percent a year—far below inflation for all but HGV drivers and fairly soon for them as well.

Biffa workers at Wealden District Council in Sussex have also begun a strike against an unacceptable pay deal. In Northampton, refuse workers voted for action against a 2.5 percent offer from Veolia. Veolia workers in Croydon are being balloted for action. To unify these struggles, Workers must build an interconnected network of rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the pro-capitalist unions in order to defend their interests and take the fight to the ruling class.



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