

Pay disputes spread among UK refuse workers

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Pay disputes among refuse collectors are spreading, with new ballots and actions springing up nationwide.

Workers at Wealden Council, Sussex voted again to continue their strike, until June 25. In Coventry, workers have voted 100 percent to extend their strike, begun in January, throughout the summer.

Isle of Wight refuse workers begin a two-week strike next Monday. Workers at Rhondda Cynon Taff in South Wales have voted overwhelmingly for strike action. Workers in Chesterfield are being balloted for action after a 100 percent rejection of employer Veolia's 4.48 percent pay offer.

The disputes are meeting an aggressive response from the ruling class, with police attacks on pickets and a bitter propaganda campaign against any pay claims.

On the Isle of Wight, Amey refuses to engage in collective bargaining with the union, insisting on direct contact with workers. Veolia told Chesterfield workers it would offer them a higher but still below-inflation six percent deal if they left the GMB.

Yet, faced with the clear need to unite and coordinate their disputes, refuse workers find their actions consistently undermined and isolated by trade unions.

Conservative campaigners at last month's local elections accused Labour of having supported bin strikes, but Labour has led the way against strikers. Labour-run Coventry city council is mounting a wholesale scabbing operation. Union reps have been suspended, and police and security guards deployed against pickets.

Pay disputes are escalating as the cost-of-living crisis bites harder. Last year, councils implemented a local government workers' pay rise cap of 1.75 percent, negotiated by the National Joint Council for Local Government Services—a joint negotiating body of 12 employers' representatives and 58 trade unions.

When this was negotiated, inflation was already 2.9 percent, making any union-agreed "rise" a real-terms cut.

RPI inflation has now topped 11 percent. Directly employed council workers have struck against these conditions. Similar deals have also been offered by the private companies providing outsourced services, offering different terms to workers in different areas.

Most of the workers employed by Biffa for Conservative-run Wealden council earn less than £10 an hour. They are demanding rises to hourly rates of £12.50 for loaders, £14.50 for Light Good Vehicle drivers and £17.50 for Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers.

On May 26, they voted 98 percent to reject the latest pay offer, described by Biffa as "17 percent for this year and a minimum of seven percent next year, a cash lump sum, and pay parity with the other two councils in the East Sussex contract." It was previously reported that the £600 lump sum was performance related.

Action began at Wealden at the end of April, although the GMB suspended its start following an eleventh hour pay offer that even they acknowledged was "well short of our members' expectations for sure."

After workers rejected the latest offer, in an attack on the right to strike, a "dozen police ... with at least 3 vans" descended on a legal peaceful picket and arrested three officials on suspicion of "obstructing the highway."

The strike, extended to June 11 following rejection of the offer, has since been extended again until June 25.

Although nominally a dispute with a private contractor, they have the full endorsement of the council. The council told local press Biffa had "made several improved offers to end this strike." They accused the GMB of making "little movement on pay demands" even as a police attack on strikers was being launched.

The union has been at pains to wind up the dispute, from its initial suspension of the action onwards. When the latest offer was rejected, GMB officer Gary Palmer pledged, "We aren't that far away from a deal and our door remains open."

The union has pinned its hopes on the government mediation service ACAS, a tried and tested method of suppressing workers' struggles based on management-union cooperation.

The likely outcome can be seen from Coventry, where Unite the union mounted no direct challenge to the council's scabbing operation. Instead, it tied the workers to ACAS, which predictably ruled in favour of the council.

The police attack at Wealden highlights how determined the employers are to offer no concessions. When local Tory MP Maria Caulfield offered to mediate in the dispute, Biffa rejected the overture, while the GMB welcomed the additional layer of corporatist integration.

Workers can put no faith in such manoeuvres designed to disarm their struggle. The Coventry workers are determined to fight, as their 100 percent vote to continue action demonstrates. But Unite is tying their hands behind their back. Announcing the extension of the strike, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said, "They have their union's backing all the way."

Despite such talk, Unite and other unions have isolated disputes and negotiated different deals, which have been used by employers to challenge pay claims.

Refuse workers in Northampton were due to strike last month at contractor Veolia, having turned down a real-terms pay cut. The GMB accused Veolia of failing to pass on a 5.5 percent increase in their council funding to workers. The two-year deal they then accepted saw loaders' pay rise to £10 per hour and drivers' to £12.

The deal has been cited as a precedent against GMB members seeking higher rates.

On the Isle of Wight, workers at Amey, the council's waste contractor, rejected a below-inflation 4.21 percent pay rise. The proposed pay increase only raised their pay to the rate Amey advertised for a trainee HGV driver in Surrey. The GMB appealed to Amey "to simply do the right thing."

GMB members voted by 90.5 percent on a 77.8 percent turnout for strike action. They are seeking pay rates of £12.50 per hour for loaders/pickers, £13.25 for cage drivers and driver and grab operatives, and £15 for HGV drivers, but the company is pointing to the Northampton deal.

Unite has reached similar agreements. Refuse workers in Rugby came out on strike against a 1.75 percent pay rise on April 26 and had voted to extend the action into June. Some of the workers were having to use foodbanks and Chesterfield workers are reportedly having to work

second jobs to make ends meet.

Rugby workers have now accepted a new offer, which Unite presents as a "pay victory." The annual rates have risen to £30,940 for drivers, £24,018 for loaders, and £24,587 for street cleaners. These have been touted as a 12 percent rise for some, but the rise varies across grades, with some workers still facing a below-inflation deal.

Unite claimed it did bring the Rugby strikers together with other workers, but there was no integration of the strike even with the ongoing action in Coventry, 15 miles away. Unite's Onay Kasab made clear the union's "new strategy" was only to "coordinate and share information," not to combine their struggles.

Strikers in Rugby and Coventry were convinced their employers were coordinating efforts to break their strikes, but the union did nothing to consolidate their actions. The GMB noted that discontent has spread through Sussex as workers have compared conditions and noted that their "key worker" status during the pandemic did not translate into a living wage.

Ballots and disputes have spread throughout the county, from Brighton, Eastbourne, Hastings, Adur and Worthing to Wealden, with votes also taking place in Littlehampton. The GMB has kept these disputes separate, negotiating different deals where it could.

The unions have become the biggest obstacle to a militant and coordinated pursuit of the class struggle. To unify their actions, refuse workers must build an interconnected network of rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of these pro-capitalist organisations, to defend their interests and take the fight to the ruling class.



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