

UK: Three GMB union officials charged under Thatcherite anti-strike law appear in court

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Three GMB union officials were brought before Hastings Magistrates' Court on Wednesday charged with offences under the 1980 Highways Act on suspicion of "obstructing the highway."

GMB Regional Officer Gary Palmer, Declan MacIntyre and Carl Turner were arrested on a picket line of striking refuse workers at the Amberstone depot in Hailsham, East Sussex on May 27. The strike over pay against private contractor Biffa was in its fourth week. The outsourcer provides domestic waste disposal services for 70,000 homes on behalf of Conservative Party-run Wealden district council.

According to the GMB, at least three police vans descended on the picket line with around a dozen officers intervening as the union officials were placed in handcuffs and led away. Most of the 40 refuse workers engaged in the dispute were paid less than £10 an hour. They were engaged peacefully in lawfully organised industrial action.

The dispute ended on June 14 with a pay settlement of between 24 and 27 percent. That the drive to prosecute and impose fines is nonetheless proceeding speaks to the importance of the case in establishing a wider precedent.

The *World Socialist Web Site* responded to the arrests by issuing an urgent appeal to all workers to demand charges be dropped, explaining the background to Section 137 of the 1980 Highways Act under which the union officials had been charged. This was introduced by the Thatcher government to curb freedom of assembly and picketing on the pretext of obstruction. The Highways Act was introduced the same year as the Employment Act which reduced the number allowed to lawfully picket to six.

All three GMB officials entered a plea of not guilty at the pre-trial on Wednesday. The trial is now set for November 16 at Brighton County Court. Speaking outside Hasting Magistrates', Gary Palmer stated, "We're completely innocent, we pleaded not guilty. Why would we do anything else? We've not broken any law. If there is, it's unfairly being imposed on trade unions in this country.

"We will now carry on. We will continue to organise workers if needs be that can't get pay rises to take industrial action to do so. The fight never stops, whatever the result of this action in November.

"And of course, we will be found not guilty, because we're innocent, never any doubt. I'll see you at the next dispute."

The fight to defeat the legal frame-up must be supported by every worker. The fact that Thatcherite laws are being reactivated in relation to an industrial dispute involving just 40 workers is a clear warning. It takes place under conditions in which the Johnson government is reprising her assault on the miners by attacking striking rail workers as "the enemy within", with the entire working class in its crosshairs.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps is preparing new legislation to strengthen what is already some of the most draconian anti-strike legislation in the industrialised world. This would involve allowing the hiring of agency workers to be used as scabs, increasing potential financial penalties on unions and introducing a minimum service agreement which would effectively outlaw strikes on all essential services.

But the trade unions are muting the opposition which must be mobilised in the working class to turn the tables on those criminalising strike action, including by

encouraging the belief that justice will prevail in the courts.

Even when faced with attempts to prosecute its own officials, the GMB—the third largest union in the country with a membership of 600,000—sits on its hands. The protest organised outside the pre-trial hearing drew an attendance of between 30-50 people.

The GMB did not even cover the event on its website, let alone use it to make a wider appeal to rally solidarity. The same was the case on its Twitter account. Nor did the Trades Union Congress take any interest. Organising was left to Hastings and Rother Trades Council with virtually no union banners other than those of the GMB present, apart from a token Unite flag.

The response follows the pattern set down by the Unite union in another refuse workers' dispute at Coventry. In a precursor to the Johnson government's scab worker plans, the local Labour council has conducted a strikebreaking operation against all-out action by 70 drivers, on strike since January 31 for a pay increase and recognition as HGV drivers. The council has deployed an arms-length but wholly owned council refuse service organised with an employment agency to run a replacement workforce.

Unite has refused to mobilise its membership to stop the scabbing operation and has remained in talks with the council spearheading the attack from day one. This continued even after government arbitration body ACAS sided with the company, which then proceeded to suspend a Unite convenor involved in the dispute.

The unions' meek surrender to victimisations and strike breaking operations is of a piece with their continued sabotage of a joint offensive by refuse workers. These are not organisations in the business of confronting the employers and local governments, but of corporatist dealmaking.

Since last year, workers have entered into struggle against councils of every political stripe and private multi-million pound outsourcing companies like Veolia, Serco and Biffa. The GMB and Unite have ensured they fight isolated battles which have led to vastly unequal pay settlements across the country.

In Wealden, refuse workers were able to win an above inflation agreement—from a very low level—while Unison enforced an inferior pay settlement on its members in the same workplace. At the end of last

year, the GMB hailed a two-year deal which ended strike action at Veolia in Sheffield by 100 of its members with a 3.5 percent agreement for this year. This month in Chesterfield, only 13 miles down the road, it called off strike action voted for by a 100 percent majority at Veolia based on acceptance of a 7.5 percent agreement.

The union described how workers at the depot were having to work two jobs because pay was so low. It now claims that this pitiful uplift has made a “real difference” based on an agreement which is even lower than CPI inflation of 9.1 percent, with RPI inflation soaring to 11.7 percent.

What passes for “the labour movement” is in reality an instrument for dividing and suppressing resistance in the working class, jettisoning the old principle of “an injury to one is an injury to all” in the face of a stepped-up state attack on workers' rights. In this way the unions facilitate the accelerating transfer of wealth to an entirely criminal and parasitic capitalist class whose rule is incompatible with any democratic norms.

We encourage all workers to read and share the statement of the Socialist Equality Party “The British rail strike: Mobilise the entire working class against the Johnson government!” It outlines a political strategy for the working class to mount its own fightback under conditions in which “Workers are not just coming into conflict with this or that corporation, but with a government intent on making them pay for the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and with a state apparatus that will be deployed ruthlessly against them.”



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