

UK: Unite ends Coventry bin dispute on strikebreaking Labour authority's terms

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The seven-month dispute by 73 Coventry refuse drivers against the strikebreaking Labour authority was ended last Friday with acceptance of a deal backed by Unite. The strike began in January with ten days of stoppages followed by all-out strike action from January 31.

Unite's reporting of the pay settlement is a combination of cover-up and spin to justify its renewed partnership with the Labour council. The union has ended the fight of the refuse drivers having isolated their stand from day one.

The July 29 press release claimed victory citing a headline 12.9 percent pay increase and the dropping of disciplinary action against Unite senior shop steward Peter Randle. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, "This deal represents a fair and just pay award and all charges against our victimised rep have now been dropped.

"It is quite frankly wrong that our members were forced to take this action against a Labour Council, but Unite will always back its members against any employer who refuses to negotiate."

The Unite leader had presented herself as standing up for workers in struggle and defying Labour by taking measures to end local funding of the party and suspending Labour councillors from membership of the union. This is now portrayed as an unfortunate misunderstanding, with no reference to the Labour council's strikebreaking operation for the past 6 months.

For the trade union bureaucracy, no red line has been crossed. At no stage did Unite mobilise any of its over one million members to shut down the scabbing operation. It was prepared to sit down with the arbitration service ACAS, which ruled in favour of the council's pay restraint policy in March, and has

remained in closed door talks with the council ever since.

Coventry council has been prepared to run up costs of £4 million to fund a scab refuse collection using agency staff and deploying an arms-length but council-owned waste disposal firm, Tom White Ltd.

Unite's press release makes no reference to the central demand of the strike for refuse drivers to be moved up a pay scale from Grade 5 to 6 in recognition of their skilled and safety-critical role as HGV drivers. The dispute developed against a background in which the Labour authority last year extended the duration for which refuse drivers remained on the lower pay grade from 6 to 11 years. To combat low pay in the face of rampant inflation, refuse drivers demanded an hourly rate increase from £11.49 to £14.37 and £14 to £17 depending on seniority—an increase of over 20 percent.

The Labour council has now stated that it has got the agreement it wanted all along, with the BBC reporting, "Council leader George Duggins said the authority would have faced costs of up to £30m per year in equal pay claims in the medium to long term, if they had agreed to pay drivers on a higher grade.

"Moving staff from Grade 5 to 6 was a demand made by the workers, but this was not part of the deal agreed on Friday."

The council stated openly that the 12.9 percent was not a "blanket increase" but included "allowing drivers to work Saturdays."

The *World Socialist Web Site* approached Unite to provide clarification on the contents of the agreement but has not received a reply.

The union also extols a lump sum payment in return for working the Christmas period as "equivalent to up to 16% - potentially worth £4,000."

Unite even promotes as an achievement the below-

inflation pay increase of 8 percent for newer drivers.

Coventry refuse drivers at the Whitley Road depot showed their determination to fight, renewing one mandate after another, most recently in June. But at every stage the response of Unite to the intensified attacks by the Labour authority was to call for a de-escalation of the dispute.

Since last year, refuse workers have waged strikes against councils of every political stripe and private multi-million-pound outsourcing companies like Veolia, Serco and Biffa. But Unite and the GMB union have ensured they have fought isolated battles leading to vastly unequal pay settlements across the country. Only a week before the agreement was reached in Coventry a strike by around 60 refuse workers at Serco in Sandwell just 30 miles away was suspended based on a 9 percent offer.

Graham described acceptance of the pay proposal as another “victory”, even though Unite had formally backed the rejection of a previous 8 percent offer, describing it as significantly below the then RPI rate of inflation of 11.7 percent. Refuse collectors are paid as low as £11.04 an hour. The union had stated that Serco’s pre-tax profits increased by 25 percent last year to £119.2 million and the company increased dividend payouts to 15 percent.

The ability of Unite to contain the dispute and renew its relationship with the Labour authority has been made possible by the pseudo-left groups the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP).

Both organisations have acted as cheerleaders for Graham, claiming that her election as general secretary last August represented a renewal of the union as a class struggle organisation. They have provided apologies or outright defences for the many sellouts of strikes under her leadership. In Coventry both tendencies act as an echo chamber for Unite.

The SWP, in an article on August 1, “All-out bins strikes ‘good victory’ in Coventry”, writes, “The determination and show of strength by the Coventry bin strikers demonstrate what can be won by standing firm on the picket line. Their victory should inspire more solid fightback, as well as show there is an alternative to Labour that looks to break strikes.”

The SP in its July 29 article, “Coventry bin workers defeat strike breaking Labour council”, reproduces the quote from Graham claiming, “This win shows the new

direction of Unite the union.”

It states, “Unite and the trade union movement will have to draw all the necessary conclusions from the lessons of the Coventry HGV strike and what we have seen from Tory-lite ‘blue’ Labour.”

All of this is to conceal the fact that Unite did not lift a finger to stop the scabbing operation by the Labour council and brought back an agreement on its terms. As for the claims that Unite has stood up to Labour or speculation that the union will spearhead an opposition, this has been flatly refuted by Graham’s most recent statements. In an article in the *Daily Mirror*, she states that Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer is guilty of nothing more than “soft words” in support of workers and calls on him once again “to pick a side.”

The actions of the Labour authority in Coventry have served as a forerunner to the measures recently taken by the Tory government, implementing national legislation to allow the hiring of agency staff as a strikebreaking force, directed immediately against the rail strikes and ultimately all workers in essential services, with teachers specifically identified by government ministers.

The real lesson of the Coventry struggle is that the further rightward lurch of Labour is mirrored within the trade union bureaucracy, which acts to suppress and curtail the growing resistance of the working class at every turn.

As the WSWs explained in March, “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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