

Union bureaucracy sabotages Scottish local authority workers' strikes as class tensions escalate

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23 August 2022

The intensifying strike movement across England and Wales is mirrored by developments in Scotland, underscoring the shared class interests of workers on both sides of the border.

Workers in Scotland confront the same brutal class policies from the Scottish National Party (SNP) administration in Edinburgh as from the reviled ruling Conservatives in London.

Last week, recycling and cleansing workers at Labour-controlled Edinburgh City Council began a strike against a pay offer far below the current inflation rate. Workers are striking for 12 days during the last weeks of the Edinburgh Festival. From August 24 and on subsequent dates, they will be progressively joined by workers at another 15 local authorities. By this week the impact of the strike was already evident in the overflowing bins throughout Edinburgh.

Local authority workers, including cleansing workers, school cleaners and assistants and many other roles were initially offered a 2 percent pay increase, then 3.5 percent following large strike votes. Last week, the umbrella group of Scottish local authorities (COSLA) authorised an offer of a “cost envelope” of 5 percent and an increase in the minimum wage to £10.50 an hour.

Inflation is currently running at 12.3 percent using the retail price index (RPI) measure, which includes housing and mortgage costs, so the marginal improvement still represents a massive real terms pay cut. The offer is to be part funded by local authorities themselves as the Scottish government has only agreed to release a miserly £140 million, forcing councils of all political stripes to seek cuts in other areas.

The latest offer, approval for which was signalled by

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, is intended to be just enough to encourage some of the 33 union officials in the Scottish Joint Council for Local Government Employees (SJC) to call off the strikes. The SNP government is desperate to avoid a determined strike by local authority workers at the same time as ongoing disputes at Network Rail, nationalised Scotrail, Royal Mail Group and BT Openreach, along with rapidly emerging confrontations at NHS Scotland, Amazon depots and key energy infrastructure sites across Britain.

Sturgeon’s fear, shared by the trade unions, is of an uncontrollable eruption of the class struggle in which a mass movement of broad sections of workers seek not only above-inflation awards, but a reversal of the terrible damage of the last decades in terms of pay, conditions and public services.

On Tuesday, Unison announced that 13,000 school and nursery staff in nine Scottish council areas are to strike on September 6, 7 and 8 in a pay dispute. Unison called the strike after talks with COSLA failed to reach an agreement.

Following overwhelming rejections of the Scottish government’s sub 5 percent pay offer, Unite, Unison, GMB, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and Royal College of Midwives members in NHS Scotland are to be balloted on industrial action. RCN members begin voting September 15, Unison members on October 3. The other unions have yet to announce dates. A survey of 3,100 doctors in Scotland between July 20 and August 5 undertaken by the British Medical Association Scotland, found that that 78 percent were willing to strike after a 4.5 percent pay offer was rejected.

The Educational Institute for Scotland indicated it was likely to hold a consultative ballot of its members after the teaching unions rejected a 3.5 percent offer.

Johanna Baxter, Unison's head of local government and vice chair of the Labour Party's National Executive, said on Unison's website regarding the new COSLA offer "... we need to understand how this additional money will be distributed and what it will mean for members in their pockets. We all want to avoid industrial action, and we will get around the table with COSLA as soon as possible, but until we have a clear pay offer our planned industrial action will continue and dates for school strikes will be notified in the coming days."

Speaking for the GMB, Keir Greenaway again did not reject the offer immediately. "The latest proposals will be considered by our local government committee, but the principle of a flat rate award is a key demand of the trade union pay claim."

Neither Baxter nor Greenaway explained how the additional pittance could possibly result in a "clear pay offer" that bore any relationship to the unions' original claim for a flat rate £3,000 pay increase and a minimum wage of £12 an hour along with reduced working hours. The unions' claim was submitted in January 2022 when RPI was 7.1 percent. Neither did Baxter, nor any of her Unite or GMB counterparts, explain how workers should respond to the near doubling of inflation since January.

Instead of re-writing the initial claim to take account of soaring living costs and mount a unified offensive in its pursuit, officials for all three unions are doing everything they can to mitigate or break up action by local authority workers.

Unite members will strike at 14 local authorities between August 24 to September 1. Unison members will strike at eight authorities, including seven authorities struck by Unite, between August 26 and 29 and again between September 7 and 10. GMB members are striking 17 authorities on the same two dates as Unison.

The mess of dates has been coupled with union officials telling their members to cross other unions' picket lines.

Signed by Dunsmore, Baxter and Greenaway, an August 17 letter to all Unison, GMB and Unite members working in Scottish local government noted

that inevitably "there will be pickets operating in some areas where members of other trade unions are not covered by a legal mandate for action which means they may face another union's pickets when arriving for work."

The trio announced: "For this reason we ask that all members respect the fact that some *colleagues may have no option but to cross a picket*. This does not mean that those individuals do not support the action their colleagues are taking, simply that they are not covered by a legal mandate that allows them to strike at the same time." [emphasis added]

The letter offered no explanation of circumstances under which "colleagues may have no option" apart from them being "not covered by a legal mandate". Neither do the authors offer any hint of support to any worker victimised for refusing to cross a picket line. A fuller expression of transformation of the trade unions into industrial enforcers, using the cover of the anti-union laws which they refuse to challenge, could hardly be devised.

In Britain, as internationally, workers confront an apparatus in the trade unions devoted to suppressing the class struggle, rendering it as harmless as possible to capitalist interests.

Workers can only escape from this bureaucratic wreckage through the creation of new rank-and-file organisations of struggle, committed to uniting workers in every sector and every workplace, in a determined defence of jobs and living standards and in preparation for a general strike to force the financial oligarchy from power.



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