

Unions suspend Scottish local authority strikes for sub-inflation offer

Steve James**4 September 2022**

In a betrayal not only of their own members, but of all workers facing ruinous attacks on their living standards, trade union leaders in Scotland have suspended a planned second wave of strikes involving thousands of cleansing workers, school and early years support staff.

The decision, taken without consulting union members, follows a powerful first wave of industrial action by cleansing workers.

Workers stopped all rubbish collections in the capital Edinburgh between August 18 and 30, and between August 24 and 31 in Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen and most local authority areas. Well supported pickets, involving workers from all three local authority unions, were held at most depots.

Piles of rubbish accumulating in the major cities and towns testified to the impact of the strike and vital work daily carried out by cleansing workers. Workers' striving for unity was in opposition to sabotage attempts by union leaders, who opposed unified strike dates and suggested workers could cross their own colleagues' picket lines.

A new wave of strikes was due to commence September 6, again involving cleansing workers. They were to have been joined by support staff in schools and early years nurseries, which would have had to close. The dispute would have rapidly impacted far broader areas of the economy, as parents were forced to skip work to stay at home looking after their children.

Instead, all three unions are recommending workers accept a below inflation pay deal. The offer is one third below the initial claim submitted in January, when inflation was far below its current level of over 12 percent.

The new offer, a substantial real terms pay cut despite some additional cash from the Scottish government,

was made after days of talks between local authority union leaders, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) administration. Unison is preparing a consultative ballot, with results due September 22, Unite and the GMB have yet to announce dates.

The offer, based on a 36-hour working week, proposes a flat rate increase of £2,000 annually for those earning up to a meagre £20,500. It proposes either £1,925 or 5 percent for those earning between £20,500 and £60,000 and £3,000 for those earning over £60,000. For those earning up to £20,500 this means around a 10 percent pay increase, tapering to 5 percent or less for those earning over £60,000. According to Unison, the total increase in the pay bill will be 7.5 percent.

The initial claim submitted by the unions' Scottish Joint Committee was for a flat rate increase of £3,000 across all grades based on a 35-hour week. The unions are therefore recommending workers accept a deal worth, in cash terms, one third less than they initially demanded for the lowest paid workers. Inflation, in the meantime, has soared from 7.1 percent Retail Price Index (RPI) when the claim was made to its current 12.3 percent and is anticipated to reach 22 percent early next year. By the end of the year, the annual real terms pay bill will be around 10 percent lower than last year; a massive pay cut.

This did not stop union leaders presenting the new offer in the most favourable light. According to Unison's head of local government, Johanna Baxter, "this offer is a victory for Unison members." She continued, "Unison wants to get this money into the pockets of council workers now while we continue the campaign to support people through the cost-of-living crisis."

Mark Ferguson, chair of the union's Scottish local government committee said cynically, "Unison will now continue its campaign to improve pay and conditions for all workers in local government."

How this campaign is served by calling off a powerful strike, part of the largest movement in the working class seen for decades, Ferguson and Baxter declined to explain.

GMB and Unite negotiators were more circumspect in their recommendations.

GMB Scotland's Senior Organiser for Public Services, Keir Greenaway conceded, "It's not a perfect offer but it is the view of GMB Scotland's local government committee that it's worthy of members consultation and their acceptance." GMB organisers and reps were visiting workplaces to "engage with members on this."

Speaking for Unite, Wendy Dunsmore merely conceded the new offer she was recommending was "credible". Dunsmore made a point of stressing that SNP First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's direct involvement was "a primary reason for the breakthrough."

So desperate were the Scottish government to end the dispute, that Sturgeon chaired a 10-hour meeting during negotiations. She based this intervention on her insistence that "There isn't a bottomless pit of money here, but we will continue to work with trade unions and with local authorities to try to find a way forward."

Sturgeon's concern, shared by the trade union bureaucracy, the British government and the entire ruling class, is that workers' necessary demands for pay increases that keep up with inflation threaten an eruption of the class struggle they are unable to control.

The local authority strikes in Scotland were called off just as nurses across the UK are being balloted by the Royal College of Nurses (RCN) union for strike action. RCN members in Scotland are voting to strike against a miserable 5 to 5.3 percent pay offer which has already been rejected by 90 percent of nurses. RCN members in England and Wales are voting against an imposition of a flat rate £1,400. Nurses in Northern Ireland who have not been offered a pay increase at all, are also voting on industrial action.

Teachers too are preparing to ballot against a sub-inflation 5 percent offer. Angela Bradley, the leader of the Scottish teachers' union, the Educational Institute

of Scotland (EIS), noted, "Teachers are increasingly angry that their pay is not keeping pace with the soaring cost of living, as inflation reaches unprecedented levels, and are impatient for the union to take action on their behalf."

The EIS submitted a claim for 10 percent, which has already been left far behind by inflation.

Members of the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) have also rejected the 5 percent offer in a snapshot survey. One participant noted, "I and some of my fellow colleagues are struggling financially for the first time and it is truly scary. All of my monthly pay is going on necessary living expenses. I can no longer save, I can no longer afford to go out to eat or grab coffee with a friend, I can no longer afford a holiday, and I'm honestly unsure if I will be able to heat my house this winter."

Local authority workers, nurses and teachers should reject the latest pay offers, which are de facto pay cuts. But the lesson of the cleansing strikes to date shows that willingness to take determined strike action is not enough. All sections of workers, including rail, postal, transport, telecoms and logistics workers currently in dispute across Britain and internationally, are posed with finding the means to ensure their struggles are not betrayed, sabotaged and divided by the union leaders.

New rank and file workers organisations to unite all workers' struggle in defence of their living standards, laying claim to the profits and vast wealth of the financial oligarchy, must be built. We urge workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss the way forward in their struggles.



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