Scottish local authority dispute betrayed by trade union bureaucracy in alliance with SNP government

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Weeks of strikes by Scottish local authority workers ended after a series of ballots at the end of September accepted a pay offer from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) government. The real terms pay cut deal impacting around 155,000 council workers was recommended by the Unite, Unison and GMB trade unions.

Spearheaded by strikes by cleansing workers in August, the dispute filled many of Scotland's towns and cities with piles of uncollected rubbish, demonstrating the immense collective power of the working class. The strike was called off early September by the Unite, Unison and the GMB union leaderships on the eve of a major escalation which, by closing schools and nurseries across Scotland, would have brought much of the economy to a halt.

To prevent this, all three unions recommended the offer following negotiations overseen by the Scottish government. An FAQ sheet circulated by Unison's Local Government Committee outlined the case for accepting the sub-inflation deal, hailing it as “the best offer that can be achieved at this time.”

Unite took a similar tone, advising its members that “CoSLA has now tabled an offer that is credible and addresses some of the crises our members find themselves in. It could only be made with additional funding from Scottish Government to the tune of approximately £460m. Unite recognises this is substantial and believes that, for the first time in a decade, Scottish Government and CoSLA have recognised YOUR VALUE.”

Why workers should feel valued at being offered what is still a pay cut was not explained.

None of the unions offered a comparison of the offer, averaging between 5 and 10 percent and with a flat rate £2,000 annually for the poorest paid, with their initial claim for a £3,000 flat rate and a shorter working week. Nor did they raise the implications of inflation being 7.1 percent (RPI) when the initial claim was made, as opposed to its current figure of 12.3 percent (RPI).

Unison reported a 64 percent voting turnout, with 67 percent voting to accept the offer. Unite recorded 71 percent in favour, while 81 percent of GMB members voting accepted the offer.

The Scottish government was so desperate to end the dispute that First Minister Nicola Sturgeon personally chaired a 10-hour meeting during negotiations with the unions. She entered the talks declaring, “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.”

Following the ending of the strike Unite regional industrial officer Wendy Dunsmore let the cat out of the bag as to the attacks that will now follow from their sell-out. “The Scottish Government are already shamefully threatening to make £500m of cuts to public services, which we will not tolerate. The robbing Peter to pay Paul narrative being spun by government ministers that decent pay rises only come with another service in the public sector being slashed is dangerous and it will be fought inch by inch by Unite.”

As its role in pushing through yet another below inflation deals, Dunsmore’s rhetoric about waging a fight should be treated with the contempt it deserves.

The government made absolutely clear its intention to push through emergency budget cuts as soon as the strikes were called off. Speaking to Holyrood (Scottish

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parliament) on September 7, acting Finance Secretary John Swinney said the Scottish budget of £56 billion was worth £1.7 billion less than in December last year due to inflation. Additionally, More money for the lowest paid, funded by the Scottish Government... means... that we must find additional savings. We said there was no more money and there is not. Funding this agreement means taking money from elsewhere."

Swinney itemised cuts of £179 million to employability, wind, agriculture and transport schemes while a full emergency budget is due sometime after the SNP conference this month. On October 4, Swinney told Holyrood's Finance and Public Administration Committee that the public sector workforce would "undoubtedly" have to be reduced. He intended to do this "in a spirit of partnership". In other words, Swinney intends to rely on the trade unions to sack and discipline public sector workers.

The SNP's agenda austerity agenda exposes claims from Roz Foyer, Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) General Secretary, that the Scottish government can be pressured into acceding to demands from workers. Foyer hailed the outcome of the local authority dispute as showing, "When there is the political will to do so, instigated by Scotland's workers and with the assistance of political leaders, the Scottish Government can indeed intervene to help those most in need."

On September 6, the day before Swinney announced the new cuts package, Foyer continuing peddling illusions in the political establishment, writing in an STUC press release, "When used, the powers of our Parliament can bring positive change."

Lessons need to be drawn. As well as ongoing strikes involving university staff, rail and postal workers as part of an escalating fightback by workers throughout the UK, strike ballots are currently underway among 50,000 Scottish National Health Service workers following massive rejections of a 5 percent pay offer. Royal College of Nursing members in Scotland are also balloting on strike action, as are teachers in the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS). EIS members returned a 91 percent vote in favour of strike action in last month's "consultative ballot." Formal strike ballots of teachers are due to commence October 12.

All these groups of workers are posed with taking the organisation of their struggle out of the hands of the trade union functionaries. Workers should take steps now to set up democratic rank-and-file committees of university, communication, health workers, nurses and teachers. These committees, independent of the trade union apparatus, should seek to direct union assets in pursuit of workers' claims, enforce decent strike pay and ensure all decisions and negotiations are held openly.

Workers must unify across union and sectoral lines, where the trade unions now impose divisions, bringing the struggles of health workers together with those of teachers and every other section of workers facing devastating attacks on their living standards.

The sellout of the local government workers disabuses all claims made by the STUC and its constituent unions that the Scottish parliament/SNP is an ally to be pressured into "positive change." For years, the SNP claimed to be to the left of Labour and opposed to austerity, but its escalating attacks on the working class over the last decade expose it as a party of big business and enemy of the working class. The only allies of workers in Scotland are workers throughout the UK and internationally, who are fighting the same attacks on their jobs, pay, conditions and pensions.

To discuss taking this fight forward, we urge workers to contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today.

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