

UK local councils and private sector partners intensify attacks on refuse workers

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Refuse collection workers face an assault on their pay, terms and conditions at the hands of the UK's local authorities and private outsourced companies—including many that are wholly-owned by the local authority and that won the contract bid by offering low pay and high levels of exploitation.

There are several ongoing disputes. Five have been settled or averted in the last few weeks as employers made supposedly improved pay offers, accepted by the trade unions, which in no way meet up with the huge surge in the cost of living. Several more disputes are in the pipeline.

The collection of domestic refuse is the responsibility of local authorities. However, many councils, regardless of which political party is in control, outsource refuse services. Refuse workers provide an essential service but are among the lowest paid.

Forty Unite union members, employed by contractor Urbaser in Selby are holding four-day stoppages. Urbaser is contracted to Conservative-controlled North Yorkshire unitary authority for refuse services in the Selby area. The Unite members rejected an eight percent pay offer. Bin loaders and ground workers are paid only £10.64 an hour; drivers, who must have HGV licences, are paid only £12.51 an hour. Stoppages are scheduled to continue into September.

Refuse collection workers employed by Allerdale Waste Services (AWS), serving Workington and environs, began an all-out strike May 16. AWS is wholly owned by the Labour-controlled Cumberland council. The GMB and Unite union members demanded higher pay as loaders were paid £10.90 an hour and drivers were on £11.89 an hour, among the lowest rates in the country.

The council had been using agency staff to break the strike, but a High Court order effective August 10 stopped employers using agency staff against strikers. To circumvent this the council planned to put agency staff on short-term contracts. On Thursday, the strike ended after a vote on a union-backed deal brokered by the conciliation service Acas. The settlement sees loaders pay go from £10.90 an hour to a below inflation £11.81 (8.3 percent). Drivers see their pay increase from £11.99 an hour to £13.62 an hour (13.6 percent.)

Refuse workers employed by Labour-controlled Canterbury City Council's waste collection service Canenco have been on

strike since July 5, with stoppages scheduled to go on until September 10. Canenco is wholly owned by Canterbury City council.

The GMB members are demanding £15 an hour for HGV drivers and £12 an hour for loaders. They are seeking pay parity with refuse collection workers in neighbouring local authorities. Canenco recently offered to meet the workers' demands but only to be paid from January next year.

Recent disputes settled or averted include those in Bristol, Somerset, Sandwell, South Gloucestershire and the Derbyshire Dales.

In Bristol, 300 refuse workers employed by Bristol Waste, members of the Unite and Unison unions, were due to strike against a company owned by the Labour council. Many were only being paid just above the minimum wage.

Under the deal negotiated by the unions they received an 8.5 percent increase over 12 months and a one-off £500 payment. This falls short of the RPI rate of inflation currently at 9 percent—it has been in double digits for most of the last two years.

A deal in July averted a strike by around 200 Unite union members working for Suez under contract to Somerset council. The company was able to push through a nine percent offer. Loaders had been on £10.98 an hour and drivers on £13.63 an hour.

After four weeks of stoppages, GMB members working for Serco on a Sandwell Borough Council contract returned to work after the union agreed an 8.5 percent pay deal in July.

Around 150 Unite union members employed by Suez under contract to South Gloucestershire Council returned to work at the end of July with Unite claiming they had won a 10.1 percent deal. This was a large drop from the 15 percent rise initially demanded.

Planned strikes by GMB members employed by Serco under contract to Derbyshire Dales District Council were called off after the union accepted a pay deal bringing them into line with other Derbyshire local authorities.

GMB members employed by Veolia, under contract to Sheffield City Council are being balloted for strike action. They have rejected a two-year deal comprising an eight percent rise backdated to May this year followed by a two percent rise in

May next year. The ballot closes September 4.

At Labour-controlled Coventry Council, forty HGV refuse lorry drivers in the Unite union voted to strike after the council decided to end widely accepted “task and finish” provisions, whereby refuse workers go home after finishing their round.

A July 31 Unite press release stated, “Coventry council has threatened its refuse workers with significant cuts to their terms and conditions and is refusing to negotiate... The threats were issued to Unite during talks with the council this afternoon (July 31), which subsequently collapsed... The attacks are part of the council’s attempts to fight equal pay claims by GMB members.”

The pending dispute results from a sell-out deal brokered in July last year by Unite to end a seven-month-long bitter strike by over 70 HGV Coventry Council refuse drivers. Coventry Council used agency staff and its arms-length council-owned Tom White Ltd waste disposal firm to break the strike.

The main demand to upgrade the drivers pay from Grade 5 to 6 in recognition of their skills and responsibilities was not met, saving the council around £30 million in equal pay terms claims. Unite hailed the 12.9 percent pay settlement but the council stated that this was not a “blanket increase” and included items such as “allowing drivers to work Saturdays.” The union hailed a below-inflation pay increase of 8 percent for newer drivers.

Within months the deal has unravelled. An April 4 *BBC News* article stated the council had stopped making payments related to the deal without informing Unite of its intention.

A leaked email sent by Unite local representative Peter Skerrett to Coventry councillors read, “You will of course be aware that following nearly eight months of strike action involving our refuse driver members, we did finally reach an agreement last year. I am less sure if you are aware that for some of our members the payments linked to that agreement have now been withdrawn over the last few weeks. We had agreed that a review would take place.”

The major issue for the union bureaucracy was that it was not consulted on the changes imposed. The email continued, “But equally no changes should have been enforced without first getting union agreement. Our view is that this now means that we are once again in dispute... We are asking that while negotiations take place, the payments are reinstated... should this not be possible... (we will) issue the council with notice for industrial action.”

While many councils still outsource services such as refuse collection, there is a growing trend toward bringing services back in house. A 2019 report by the Association for Public Services Excellence stated 77 percent of councils were planning to bring services in house. A roundtable panel discussion report published in the *Local Government Chronicle* on June 7 noted, “The big outsourcing contracts that were in vogue... in (the) naughties [sic] have fallen from favour—not least due to some well publicised private sector failings—and

authorities are increasingly turning to in-house provision.”

Croydon Council, led by a Conservative mayor but with no overall control, plans to continue to use an outsourced company for its refuse collection after current provider Veolia is replaced in 2025.

The *Inside Croydon* blog noted June 2 how outsourcing was primarily organised to funnel taxpayers’ money into the corporate sector, at the expense of a proper provision of services and of workers’ pay, conditions and pensions. With the Veolia contract, “bidders offered unrealistically low prices in order to win the deal, and then did not provide the levels of service that had been expected. In 2020, Croydon gave Veolia a £22 million contract ‘uplift’ in order to improve the service provided...(with) no noticeable improvement.”

A report to the council stated that costs incurred by a different outsourcer were likely to increase. “[Jason] Perry’s [elected Tory mayor] nodding-dogs cabinet nonetheless approved the mayor’s outsourcing plan, their main concern not being on service delivery to residents, but on shaving costs by not incurring any pension liabilities for the waste contractor’s workers.”

The article quoted a council report, “The outsourcing model carries much lower risks for the council in terms primarily of HR and pension contributions and is thus the recommended option.”

The intensification of attacks on pay and conditions by councils and their outsourcing partners requires that the leadership of a fightback is taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracy by the rank-and-file. The unions have done nothing to mobilise workers industry-wide in an offensive against the employers, isolating every dispute to allow the local authorities and private companies to come up with rotten deals.

The fight to organise independently of the union bureaucracy is being led by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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