

Scottish local authority workers should reject COSLA's agreement

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Local government workers in Scotland should reject the latest miserable agreement reached between Unison—the main public sector trade union, the Scottish government and the local authorities umbrella body, COSLA.

The agreement is being sold by Unison as a breakthrough which “could bring an end to the current pay dispute” involving tens of thousands of local authority workers. It is nothing of the sort.

Rather, endless prevarications, diversions and delays have allowed Unison officials to reach a point where they aim to finally close this year’s wage negotiations without major industrial conflict. Unison officials are seizing on vague promises of discussions around a minimum wage of £15 an hour and changes in the annual negotiation timetable to shut down a pay dispute which has been ongoing for most of 2024.

Scottish local government workers are the last still in dispute in the sector as their struggle was isolated from that of local government workers in England and Wales by the trade unions. In the weeks leading up to October 15-16, hundreds of thousands of local government workers in England and Wales were balloted for strike action by Unison, Unite and the GMB unions. The unions put forward a set of conservative demands—given the scale of attacks on members pay and conditions over a decade—including a pay increase of £3,000 or 10 percent, whichever is greater; a 2-hour reduction in the working week; an additional day of annual leave; a review of ethnic, gender and disability inequalities in pay; and progress towards a minimum rate of £15 an hour in two years’ time or sooner.

The England and Wales dispute went back to February, with the unions avoiding a mobilisation of a powerful section of the working class after the National Joint Council (NJC) for Local Government Services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland insulting offer of £1,290 (worth between 2.5 and 5.77 percent), for staff outside of London. Employees in inner London were offered £1,575 or 2.5 percent, whichever is higher, and in outer London £1,491 or 2.5 percent, whichever is higher.

Having seen these unions sabotage struggles throughout the public and private sector to end the 2022-23 strike wave, workers had no faith in them leading any fight in local government. Unison HQ did not release the ballot figures, but one of its branches, Sandwell revealed that across England and Wales the average vote was almost 80 percent for action but on a 29 percent turnout. Under anti-strike laws, industrial action ballots must have a turnout of 50 percent to be valid. Of the 4,093 employers balloted, UNISON passed the 50 percent ballot threshold in 682. Unison quickly moved to end the dispute, ruling out any action against the hundreds of employers where the threshold was reached.

The GMB membership backed the employers offers and Unite said it would only ballot in those areas where a mandate was reached.

The dispute in Scotland goes back to January this year when Unison, GMB and Unite, representing up to 240,000 local authority workers submitted a pay claim for a one-year settlement, a minimum hourly rate of £15 by April 2026, a 7 percent across the board increase, or £1.60 an hour increase and a reduction in the working week. The claim, barely above the then inflation rate of 5.2 percent, would have done little to redress years of sub inflation pay rises, effectively pay cuts.

By May, members of all three unions had rejected an initial offer of a 2.2 percent rise over 6 months, followed by another 2 percent the following 12 months. The unions balloted some of their members and in early July Unite announced it had secured mandates for strike action in 16 local authorities across Scotland. By early August, despite a marginally improved offer, all three unions were preparing a fortnight of walkouts in waste services from August 14.

In three of the last four years, part of a broad international strike wave, workers, have supported strike action during the local authority pay round. In 2021, 1,500 waste collection workers in Glasgow stopped collections across the city during the COP26 environmental conference. The union triumvirate cancelled a strike across all local authorities at

the last minute. Officials were unable to prevent strike action in Glasgow.

The following year, 2022, waste workers in Edinburgh struck for the duration of the Edinburgh festival, adding piles of stinking garbage to the city's tourist attractions. Shorter unified strikes were held across Scotland. Workers rejected union authorisation for picket lines to the crossed, as the three unions held short strikes on different days. On both occasions, waste workers won great popular support. To avoid a rerun, Unison also balloted 38,000 school, early years and family centre staff, but held off balloting its entire membership.

Days before the August deadline, COSLA and the Scottish government came up with another incremental increase of 3.6 percent for all grades and 5.6 percent or £1,292 for the lowest paid. Both GMB and Unite encouraged their members to accept and called off all strike action. COSLA implemented the pay offer across all their staff.

Unison ran a consultative ballot in which the new offer was rejected by 86 percent of respondents. Unison already had mandates for strike action in waste services in 13 local authorities, including Glasgow City Council, and in schools and early years centres in another five authorities. Unison reluctantly authorised a two-week strike by education workers in one local authority only, Perth and Kinross, and suspended proposed action in waste collection.

Presenting this as putting pressure on recently installed First Minister John Swinney, whose constituency is Perth and Kinross, Unison sought to run down workers' patience in the run-up to Christmas, while giving the Scottish National Party administration in Edinburgh as much time as possible to repackage their offer. Unison finally announced it would prepare a postal strike ballot for all council staff, but declined to even present a timetable, claiming this would "take several weeks."

Nearly 10 months after the initial claim was submitted, on October 21, all primary schools, early learning centres and some secondary schools in Perth and Kinross were unable to reopen after the October holidays. As the strike progressed, the local authority opened a minority of primary and most secondary schools. Workers maintained pickets at many schools, and on October 29, hundreds participated in a large demonstration and rally at Perth's North Inch Park. Swinney's constituency office was picketed.

In the aftermath of the Perth and Kinross strike, Unison, COSLA and the Scottish government announced an "enhanced" agreement. This includes no extra pay for workers, no re-opening of this year's negotiations, the outcome of which has already been implemented. Rather, the agreement was set out in a letter from COSLA to the trade unions. COSLA spokesperson Katie Hagmann said the

employers were responding to "Unison's asks in relation to non-pay elements," claiming they supplemented and "enhanced the already strong pay offer on the table."

According to Unison, in addition to the offer to "seriously discuss" a £15 hour minimum, the employers are willing to "improve local government pay landscape" by:

- holding local government finance meetings between the trade unions, councils and the Scottish government, before councils' annual budgets are set
- holding talks to reduce the working week
- agreeing to make a "credible" offer before 1 April 2025 and in subsequent years, instead of dragging the process out for months.

On the basis of this improved "landscape," Unison are consulting their 150,000 members in Scottish local government and recommending acceptance.

The agreement amounts to a further integration of the GMB, Unite and Unison apparatus into the structure of national and local government. By seeking to avoid the annual protracted ritual of offers, consultative ballots, marginally changed, allegedly credible offers, threats, delays and limited strike action, union officials aim to prevent strikes taking place at all.

Such is the potential social strength of local authority workers across Britain that even the most limited strikes hold the possibility of becoming focal points and examples for far broader sections of workers seeking to alleviate their crushing social circumstances.

Posed urgently is the development of rank-and-file committees led by the most trusted workers in schools, community centres, local authority offices, waste services, social care providers and every other essential social service. These should co-ordinate their efforts and set about the necessary struggle to secure resources for all the vital social services they provide from the capitalist class.

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