

UK: Birmingham refuse workers on indefinite strike against pay cuts

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Hundreds of waste collectors employed by Birmingham City Council are striking indefinitely after talks failed to reach a settlement. The Unite union members have been striking at regular intervals for nine weeks in opposition to pay cuts and walked out indefinitely on March 11.

The ballot means the strike involving 350 workers could last through the spring and summer.

Action began in January over the planned scrapping of the safety critical role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officer, which has hit 150 workers with pay cuts of up to £8,000. These are being imposed by the unelected commissioners now in control of the effectively bankrupt Labour Party-run Birmingham City Council.

Vast sums are being slashed across the local authority, with the council workforce and working class bearing the brunt. In March 2024, the council approved another almost £300 million in cuts to key services over two years—the largest cut ever imposed in the history of local government. This includes over 600 job losses and an almost 18 percent increase in council tax bills. A further £83 million in cuts is projected for next year, rising to £159 million the year after.

A new Direction (formal order) dictates the sell-off of more of the city's assets, bringing in a total of £1 billion, to plug funding gaps. A report from the commissioners published in February stated that less than a third of the target (£300 million) had been raised so far in asset sales and the process had to be accelerated.

The commissioners were appointed by the previous Conservative government and kept in place by Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government.

It is not just huge pay cuts and an attack on pay grades that the council is after. A statement put out by

Unite this week noted, "In January, despite the huge reliance on agency workers, posters were put up in refuse depot staff rooms inviting all council-employed bin loaders and drivers to apply for voluntary redundancy."

A vast amount of waste has built up throughout the city, creating a public health hazard, but the council is digging its heels in. Workers are up against an organised strikebreaking operation and have faced regular intimidation on the picket lines. Police have claimed that pickets "slow walking" at depot gates are engaged in "circling"—stating that the practice is banned under anti-strike legislation.

In recent days this escalated when Andy Vaughan—the council's interim director of street scene in charge of the council's bin depots—drove over a striker's foot at the picket line outside Lifford Lane bins depot in Kings Norton. *Birmingham Live* quoted a Unite spokesperson who said the striker "was only saved from having his bones broken because he was wearing his work boots."

The council immediately upped the ante, claiming that any violence stemmed from the picket line. While saying it would look into the incident, the council stated, "The level of intimidation and action outside the waste depots is causing an unsafe environment for everyone".

The day after the striker was injured, a large police presence, including five police vehicles and a helicopter, was sent to monitor the Atlas depot picket line.

In the fight to defend their pay and jobs, workers are in a battle with the Unite union bureaucracy as much as with the council and its commissioners. The council is on the offensive after a series of already-imposed attacks colluded in by Unite.

In its March 10 press release on the vote to extend the

strike, Unite noted the low pay across the workforce, stating, “Most Birmingham refuse workers are paid between £24,027 and £25,992—just slightly more than the £23,795 workers on the minimum wage earn annually.”

It added, “The workers already voluntarily accepted cuts to pay and terms and conditions to assist the council after it declared bankruptcy. This included giving up £1,000 in shift pay.”

The fact that workers are poorly paid is the responsibility of the union which has negotiated and agreed terms with management. It was Unite who “voluntarily accepted cuts”, not workers. What did the union, which members pay their dues to on the understanding that it will defend their pay and conditions, do to mobilise opposition?

The agency workers who make up at least 40 percent of Birmingham’s refuse workforce—and are being used by the council to break the strike—are also members of Unite. Yet no attempt has been made by the union to call them out in a joint offensive, let alone to mobilise its wider one million-strong membership.

This is under conditions in which its members in refuse departments in councils around the UK are facing similar attacks on their pay and conditions. Unite has isolated 37 refuse department workers on strike for seven months at Sheffield City Council over union recognition at Veolia, a French based multinational company. Veolia manages refuse disposal on behalf of the council, which is led by Labour councillor Tom Hunt but under no overall party control.

Three agency workers were sacked this week in Birmingham “after they briefly spoke to striking colleagues on the picket line, before undertaking their collection rounds,” Unite reported.

Unite is doing everything to disarm its members, with Birmingham City Council used as a test case to enforce a level of austerity—against its 1.1 million population—outstripping that imposed under successive Tory-led central governments from 2010-24.

In its statement following the collapse of this week’s talks, the union pleaded that the council could end the dispute “by agreeing to pay a decent rate of pay,” when nothing of the sort is on offer. Unite politely reported, “The talks were inconclusive. There was an exchange of information and Unite asked for clarity on a number of points raised by the council, which are currently

being worked on.”

Any deal arising out of such niceties can only end in workers handing over even more of their pay and conditions, laying the basis for the replacement of full-time directly employed staff with a cheap-labour agency workforce.

Workers must heed the lessons of the defeat of the refuse workers strike in nearby Coventry in 2022, at the hands of Unite, which ended that 72-day struggle on the terms of the Labour run council—which also mounted a scab refuse collection using agency staff and deploying an arms-length but council-owned waste disposal firm.

To take forward their fight, strikers in Birmingham must establish a rank-and-file committee, independent of Unite, allowing them to reach out to and coordinate with all other council workers under attack. Only on this basis can a successful fightback be waged defending workers’ pay, conditions and livelihoods against the austerity agenda of the political and corporate representatives of the ruling elite.



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