

Birmingham Council, in alliance with Labour government, intensifies operation against refuse workers strike

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Hundreds of waste collectors in dispute against Birmingham City Council (BCC) are facing a co-ordinated assault, including the possible national mobilisation by the Labour government.

Since March 11, the refuse workers have stepped up their fight against wage cuts with an indefinite strike. The workers in the Labour Party-run local authority—the largest in the country—are opposing council plans to scrap the safety-critical Grade 3 role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officer, which has hit 150 workers with pay cuts of up to £8,000.

While controlled by Labour, the council is being run by unelected commissioners sent in by the previous Conservative government after the authority effectively went bankrupt—and who are imposing staggering austerity cuts of £300 million. They have refused every entreaty by the Unite trade union to settle the dispute. Instead, the council leaders have utilised a public health crisis with 17,000 tonnes of waste strewn across the city to intensify their strikebreaking operation.

On Monday, BCC declared a “major incident” granting itself powers to effectively criminalise the strike. Explaining it was “already working to an emergency plan,” the council said it would now:

“Quickly increase the availability of street cleansing and fly-tip removal with an additional 35 vehicles and crews around the city.

“Work with partners to better manage the risks the city is facing, including health and fire risks and allow for increased data and intelligence sharing.” In a clear threat to picket lines, “this will be focussed upon support to allow our vehicles to safely exit and enter our depots on time.

“Allow the council to explore what further support is

available from neighbouring authorities and government to assist us in managing the situation.”

Local Government Minister Jim McMahon issued a statement in Parliament later that day, saying that while “Ministers cannot legally intervene in this industrial action”, he supported the major incident declaration and backed “local leaders in bringing the situation under control in the weeks to come.”

BCC slandered strikers in saying it had no option but to declare a major incident, claiming that their action was responsible for the city being deluged in rubbish. Council leader John Cotton declared, “I respect the right to strike and protest, however actions on the picket line must be lawful and sadly the behaviour of some now means we are seeing a significant impact on residents and the city’s environment.”

A council statement complained that pickets were impeding its contingency waste collection. Yet blockading depots is exactly the point of the strike by refuse workers fighting to defend their livelihoods.

Monday’s action is the latest in a series of provocations by the council—including lies about violent pickets—aimed at whipping up hostility against strikers while the authorities attempt to impose a crushing defeat. This was made clear a few days before the declaration of a major incident, with the council announcing it is seeking to enforce an effective fire-and-rehire scheme.

On March 27, BCC threatened that “next week we will formally notify and enter a period of collective consultation regarding compulsory redundancies for those who have declined all offers on the table.” It added, “There are now 41 workers who have declined any offer, and 35 workers who opted for valuable and

skilled driver training who have also told us via a letter from Unite that they are working under protest.”

The opposition Conservative Party, backed by sections of the Labour Party, are demanding that the government bring the strike to a halt immediately. In response to McMahon’s statement in Parliament, Tory MP Kevin Hollinrake called “for a Cobra-led response.” Cobra is a committee that meets in Downing Street to address national crises like the COVID pandemic. National government should “appoint binmen from the private sector” to break the strike, said Hollinrake.

Labour MP for Birmingham Edgbaston Preet Kaur Gill—who serves as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Business and Trade minister Jonathan Reynolds—also denounced the strike, first claiming that “this week a constituent wrote to me to say that they had been bitten by a rat”.

“Seventeen people cannot hold 1.2 million Birmingham residents to ransom”, said the Labourite. It was “unacceptable that Unite pickets have been frustrating the council’s contingency plans by blocking depots” and “time for Unite to accept the fair deal on the table,” she added.

Amid blatant attempts to smash the strike, and threats to sack strikers, Unite’s press release on March 31 responding to the major incident declaration was a betrayal.

General Secretary Sharon Graham’s pledge to defend “Birmingham’s refuse workforce to the hilt” proposes nothing to mobilise other council workers—which, as the press release notes, are already in the cross-hairs. She states that “this is really about stamping out opposition to unleash austerity 2.0 on Birmingham,” but from Unite’s leader this is hot air.

Unite’s appeal is directed to the employers, asking them not to prolong the dispute, which would only “throw more cash down the drain.” Its call for further “intensive negotiations” is a recipe for demobilising and isolating Birmingham refuse workers, while allowing the council to proceed with its strikebreaking: the union admits that the major incident was declared, without notice, “while it was in official negotiations with the union”.

With its insistence on limiting the dispute to Birmingham, Unite is providing a service to the Labour government seeking to prevent the breakout of wider

industrial action against its right-wing policies designed in partnership with big business and the banks.

In a separate statement, Unite national lead officer Onay Kasab—a member of the Socialist Party—extended the union’s appeals to include even the Labour government, saying, “We believe the government is being misled by the council and the commissioners as to the true nature of the dispute.”

To suggest that the Labour government is an innocent bystander in the Birmingham dispute is politically criminal. This is a government of austerity committed to tearing up social services and what remains of the welfare state to fund militarism and war. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and the Labour Party are using the Birmingham strike as a test case, whose defeat would be used as a springboard for its austerity agenda.

McMahon has insisted that “Any deal to end industrial action must maintain value for money”; that is, it must be ended only at workers’ expense.

To defeat the concerted efforts of the commissioners, local Labourites, the Starmer government and Tories to crush the strike, workers must reject Unite’s claim that a mutually beneficial settlement is on offer. They will need new organisations, independent of the union bureaucracy, to democratically decide their demands and discuss a new strategy, including as a necessity reaching out to all other council workers under attack or at risk.

Only on this basis can a successful fightback be waged defending workers’ pay, conditions and livelihoods against the austerity agenda of the ruling elite. Contact the WSWS on the form below to submit your comments on the dispute and link up with other workers.



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