

Starmer government greenlights Birmingham Labour council using police to break bin workers strike

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Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government has organised the use of police to shut down refuse workers' picket lines by Birmingham City council (BCC), under "major incident" powers.

Since March 11, 350 bin workers have been taking all-out strike action in a dispute which began in January. They are opposing plans by Labour-run Birmingham City Council (BCC) to scrap the safety-critical Grade 3 role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officer, which has hit 150 workers with pay cuts of between £2,000 to £8,000. The council is currently led by unelected commissioners who are imposing, with the backing of local Labour leaders, £300 million of austerity cuts over two years in the UK's second largest city. The commissioners were appointed by and report directly to Downing Street.

In Parliament last Wednesday, Starmer denounced the strike and demanded it end. During Prime Ministers Questions, he said "In relation to the situation in Birmingham, it is completely unacceptable. I fully support the council in declaring a major incident to resolve the situation." Trailing the government's next steps Starmer stated, "We'll put in whatever additional support is needed."

Labour Local government minister Jim McMahon was despatched to Birmingham 24 hours later to discuss with the BCC how the strike could be broken. McMahon said, "Residents want this rubbish dealt with as soon as possible... This strike must be brought to a close with all parties redoubling efforts to get around the table and to find a resolution."

The *Birmingham Live* news site cited a Downing Street spokesman who said, "Following that meeting, police have installed barriers at the picket line [on Friday] to prevent waste lorries being recklessly blocked from leaving the depots this morning to start dealing with the

backlog."

This was followed by another threat Thursday from Downing Street that the members of the Unite union must end their strike and accept what is being demanded by the council. A spokesman said, "Unite need to focus on negotiating in good faith, drop their opposition to changes needed to resolve long-standing equal pay issues, and get round the table with the council to bring this strike to an end."

The clampdown on picket lines agreed Thursday was put into operation Friday, with the council sending vanloads of police to Atlas council depot in the Tyseley district. At this picket, as with others in the city, strikers have been walking slowly in teams to slow down trucks manned by agency strike-breakers recruited to clear a backlog of over 17,000 tonnes of waste.

Police erected crowd barriers and more security staff were posted to prevent pickets from blocking rubbish trucks exiting the depot. Pickets were also dispersed by police at the Lifford Lane and Perry Barr depots.

On Saturday, Downing Street despatched Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner and McMahon for a further meeting with BCC leaders, with a remit to "press all parties involved to get around the table and come to a resolution". Rayner told Greatest Hits Radio bluntly of the strikers, "They can't be blocking lorries, the lorries that are going out."

The Starmer government is committed to imposing austerity, with over £15 billion in welfare, pensions and Whitehall department cuts already enforced within nine months of Labour taking power. This month, tens of millions of workers have been hit with hundreds of pounds in additional costs in what is dubbed "Awful April": electricity, gas, water, broadband and mobile phone bills, and the TV licence and car tax.

Among the largest bills workers face is council tax. This year, the payment on a typical band D property rises by £109 a year, to £2,280. Following a rise in council tax of just below 10 percent last year, Birmingham Council upped it by a further 7.5 percent for 2025-26.

To win the first major struggle by the working class against Starmer and a flagship Labour council, refuse workers must reject Unite's constant appeals that the authority come to its senses and reach a fair settlement. Even after the police were sent to break up picket lines, Unite leader Sharon Graham declared that despite the council "moving the goalposts" and "only scheduling meetings once a week... Unite has said it is ready to negotiate anytime and everyday if necessary."

Graham pleaded, as if Starmer wasn't already organising the smashing of the strike, "If the government were really concerned about the residents of Birmingham they would get the decision makers in a room of which they are clearly one, to ensure that Unite's solutions on the table were adopted."

Graham gave a hint as to Unite's actual "solutions", opposing any talk of intransigence on its part. She stated, "Hold the front page, Unite has already agreed major changes, with the removal of job and knock and shift pay last year and in Unite's current proposals there are no equal pay issues."

To prevent their strike being crushed, refuse workers must fight to mobilise solidarity action by all sections of the working class in Birmingham and nationally to defeat the conspiracy of the commissioners, local Labourites and the Starmer government. A rank-and-file leadership, operating independently of the union bureaucracy, must be formed to democratically discuss a new strategy, beginning as a necessity with reaching out to all other council workers now under attack.

Only on this basis can a successful fightback be waged against the austerity agenda of the ruling elite.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will do all we can to assist in this. Contact us on the form below to discuss setting up a rank-and-file committee.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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