

Defend Birmingham refuse workers against Labour government's strike-breaking operation!

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The working class must mobilise to defend Birmingham refuse workers against the strike-breaking operation launched by the Starmer government, coordinated with the Labour-run council and unelected commissioners enforcing £300 million in austerity cuts on Britain's second largest city.

The indefinite strike action by 350 refuse workers who are members of Unite is in its fifth week, opposing plans to eliminate the safety critical Grade 3 role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officers (WRCO), hitting 150 workers with pay cuts of between £2,000 and £8,000 and reducing crews from four to three.

The strike-breaking operation has been ramped up over the past week.

The build-up of 17,000 tonnes of waste on the streets of Birmingham—underscoring the essential role bin workers perform—was seized on by the Labour council to declare a “major incident” on March 31, giving itself extraordinary powers to effectively illegalise strike action and enforce sweeping pay cuts. It has drafted in extra agency workers and additional vehicles to bolster strike-breaking operations and called on support from neighbouring councils.

The Labour-run authority proceeded to deploy these repressive measures only after its “major incident” was green-lighted by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer. Speaking in parliament last Wednesday, Starmer denounced the strike and demanded its ending, pledging: “we’ll put in whatever additional support is needed.”

On Friday, Starmer’s offensive swung into action with a police clampdown at the three yards hit by the strikes: the Atlas depot in Tyseley, Perry Barr, and Lifford Lane. Workers had previously conducted slow-walking in front of waste trucks manned by agency workers, undermining the strike-breaking operation.

Police officers dispersed pickets on Friday, herding them behind crash barriers manned by security guards.

A West Midlands Police statement read, “We continue to liaise with Birmingham City Council, Unite and partners from across the city regarding industrial action and continue to carefully consider the situation and impact on the community.

“Powers under section 14 of the Public Order Act 1986 have not been implemented due to the co-operation of those picketing.”

Those prosecuted under this law face anything from a £1,000 fine to a three-month custodial sentence.

The walkout by 350 bin workers from March 11 ceased to be a local dispute the moment Starmer took leadership of the strike-breaking operation.

According to the BBC, “Birmingham City Council said it had more than 20 bin lorries out on Saturday and Sunday, with vehicles now being unimpeded by striking workers as they left depots.”

The Conservative-run Lichfield District Council in Staffordshire agreed to send refuse crews to Birmingham from Wednesday this week to assist with the strike breaking. Councillor Roger Harmer, leader of the Liberal Democrats in Birmingham, called on the Labour authority to use its “major incident” powers to call in the Army and Fire Service.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) publicly rebuffed Harmer’s call. FBU executive council member for the West Midlands Andrew Scattergood declared that “firefighters are humanitarians and trade unionists we do not break strikes.” But this was not connected to an active boycott against the threat. The FBU would merely “advise members to refuse to carry out such work.”

The chief strike-breakers inciting a lynch mob atmosphere are Labour ministers, including Deputy Prime

Minister Angela Rayner, touted by trade union leaders as a “sympathetic ear”.

Health Secretary Wes Streeting told *Times Radio* on April 8, “I’m urging Unite to do the right thing, stop blocking the bin lorries and allow people to get out there and clean the streets for the people of Birmingham, who’ve suffered for far too long.” This professed concern for public health comes from the man who denounced the “begging bowl culture” of the National Health Service and plans to axe 100,000 jobs.

The repressive measures against the Birmingham bin strike are aimed against the entire working class. Labour is seeking a precedent, making clear that any section of workers who wage effective industrial action will face savage state repression.

End the isolation by “Unite”

Unite the union, led by General Secretary Sharon Graham, has not lifted a finger to mobilise its million plus membership in defence of Birmingham refuse workers. Graham did not even raise the demand that the Labour council’s strike-breaking operation be withdrawn as a precondition for the start of any talks.

This has isolated the determined fight by 350 Unite members, while Unite’s leadership promotes the fiction that Birmingham City Council can be persuaded to act in “good faith.”

On Tuesday, Unite held a rally outside Birmingham City Council House that was not even publicised on its website, with no appeal issued for council workers who face £300 million in austerity cuts to join it.

Graham then delivered an empty tub-thumping speech, later posting a photo of herself on X making a clenched fist salute with a message pledging her “absolute support” and the union’s “full backing” for the refuse workers. Meanwhile the 350 strikers are being left to fight alone. Significantly, picket lines were stood down for the day while Unite’s negotiators were huddled down with the council’s strike breakers in another round of fruitless talks.

“All I can say is we both want an end to this dispute,” commented Unite regional officer Zoe Mayou, while Graham referred to “Unite’s solutions on the table”.

A petition mounted by Unite addressed to the leader of Birmingham City Council John Cotton and Head

Commissioner Max Caller, emphasises that: “Since the council effectively declared itself bankrupt in September 2023, refuse staff represented by Unite have worked with management in good faith to ensure services continue to operate despite detrimental impacts to their pay and working conditions. This also includes implementing route changes and accepting cuts to overtime.”

Nothing exposes Graham’s claim to oppose austerity more surely than this offer from Unite to continue partnering with the council over imposing cuts to pay and conditions to reach a face-saving agreement over plans to scrap the position of WRCO.

The allies of Birmingham refuse workers are not the well paid Unite functionaries negotiating away their hard-won gains, but the hundreds of thousands of workers entering into decisive struggles against the gutting of services to pay for austerity, militarism and prioritising the profits of the corporate oligarchy.

An article in the *Independent* headlined, “14 places at risk of a Birmingham style strike”, warned: “With around half of all councils in danger of falling into bankruptcy, bin strikes may spread around the country.”

And not only bin strikes, but action by other council workers, by teachers, nurses and those in the private sector facing similar attacks.

As the WSWS wrote of the first major industrial battle against the Starmer government:

“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.”

The defence of Birmingham refuse workers is therefore not only a vital question of solidarity to defeat the Starmer government’s strike-breaking operation. It is the necessary preparation for waging a counteroffensive by the entire working class against austerity and the imposition of authoritarian forms of rule to destroy jobs, pay and critical public services.



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