

Striking Birmingham refuse workers: “We’d like every city council to come out. What they are doing here, they will be doing everywhere.”

Our reporters
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Birmingham refuse workers on the picket line at the Atlas depot on Friday spoke to the WSWS about their dispute and its significance for all workers.

After five weeks of indefinite strike action the Unite union has not lifted a finger to mobilise its million-plus membership to defeat the strike-breaking operation led by the Starmer government against the 350 refuse drivers and loaders.

A loader, one of the 150 directly impacted by the abolition of the role of Grade 3 Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO), explained:

“This all came at us out of the blue—dropping our grades and money down too.

“We are losing up to £8,000 as council tax increases and the cost of living rises, with gas and electricity bills increasing every day. My mortgage is going up and it could put some people at risk of losing their home with the pay cut.

“My role as a WRCO is to look after the safety of the vehicle for the public. We are like the third eye of the driver. We are trained staff. Children running in between cars, especially at school times, and summer holidays, there’s a lot of danger out there. Vehicles can just come out of nowhere as well. The driver can’t see that in the blind spot, so we need to keep an eye out. This is safety critical.

“It’s disgusting that the council is saying we must accept a cut to our wages because there is no money, but they have the money for policing, hiring private security, extra agency staff and private contractors to break our strike.

“Labour is meant to be for the working man, but they

are not. I voted Labour thinking they might at least be some improvement on the Tories, but no. Starmer’s a Tory and is organising this strike breaking.

“They are sending money abroad for war, while people here are living on the poverty line. It is going to countries supporting genocide against the Palestinians. They passed a bill to send more money to Ukraine. It is getting to the point where you can get arrested for just talking about this.

“Now we face this type of intimidation when we take strike action. I wasn’t down here when police came to disperse pickets, but I heard they were heavy handed with pushing and shoving. They arrested one of the lads for walking alone, they didn’t charge him with anything.

“I don’t have any time for this revised deal from the Council. They are playing divide and rule between the loaders and drivers. This must be rejected.”

Another loader said he would reject the deal which he described as “A piece of shit wrapped in a Rizla (cigarette paper).”

Asked if workers were still losing between £2,000 and £8,000 in the proposed deal, he said, “Yes, yes, yes. I’ll lose about 2,000 a year.”

The proposed deal was on top of what workers at the depot had already lost in pay cuts before the plans to abolish the WRCO role. The worker said, “We used to start at 5 a.m. and as soon as these commissioners and new management came in, that changed to 6 a.m. That’s £1,100 lost straight away. We used to do four days a week and you could work on Saturday and you could work your rest days and overtime, weekends and

that's all gone. There used to be 20 percent agency workers, now it's about 50 percent agency.

"I've been a Labour supporter all my life and it kills me to say, I have to agree with you on Labour. I hate the Tories and hate the Liberals.

He said the steel barriers put up at the main entrance of the depot and moving workers to the other side of the road was like the "kettling" methods used against protesters. "That was used years ago by those Liberal bastards [referring to the 2010-15 Conservative/Liberal Democrat government]... They are saying we are vermin. But we won't accept this. We will vote against it."

A loader with more than a decade's experience said, "In the new deal I will still lose out. It's worse now. The drivers weren't getting downgraded, but they are now... They've given themselves [Birmingham city councillors] a 5.7 percent pay rise and they hit the front-facing workforce."

He called over a driver colleague and said, "He originally came out on strike because *I was losing money*. I am still losing money... I am not going to take it [the new deal] because he is losing money.

"The WRCO is basically the driver's eyes and ears at the back of the wagon and that is the role they are trying to get rid of. And yet they have advertised for two weeks of light work to clear up the backlog for a loader paying them £16 to £18 an hour, which is what they have just took off me."

The driver said, "They are calling them 'temporary-permanent jobs'. And they are offering them more than the agency staff who are working there now."

The loader said, "The agency lads there now are on £13.44 an hour and the new starters are on £16 an hour and they've never done the job before.

"It's clear to me they are attacking the old school, the backbone of your workforce. We worked through COVID. I took it home to my wife and all we got for that was a letter to say thank you. It wasn't even a personal letter. It was photocopied and signed by whoever.

"They did this [attempting to downgrade workers] in 2017 and they tried again in 2019," said the loader. "They will keep trying it.

"This is about the sixth time I have taken industrial action", he said, with the driver agreeing, "I have been on three rounds of action in my years."

The loader said he felt the Labour council were using the dispute in a bid to engineer further outsourcing by the back door: "I think they might try a LATCo, which is a local authority trading company where you work for the council although it's in another name. That would be a way of getting the wage bill down."

The driver asked, "Why are they attacking the lower paid workers when you've got a managers on £300k a year?"

The loader said, "You've got commissioners taking home £18,000 in one month. They are spending between £65,000 and £80,000 for the eight commissioners who are trying to do this."

The driver commented, "I'm old school. The Labour Party was founded to represent the working class. This isn't working class."

The loader added, "Labour isn't Labour anymore. [Deputy Prime Minister] Angela Rayner came to visit the recycle centre just over there about half a mile away. Did she come to visit the picket line? Did she f***. And that's meant to be the person who is for the working class.

"This is a test case. There are 14 councils that are watching Birmingham to see what will happen."



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