

Birmingham refuse workers condemn Starmer government's strike breaking and voice opposition to sellout deal

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A WSWS campaign team spoke with striking Birmingham refuse workers on Friday outside the Atlas depot in the Tyseley district, distributing the article "Defend Birmingham refuse workers against Labour government's strike-breaking operation!"

Pickets were corralled on the opposite side of the road from the council depot, with crash barriers supervised by police officers and a line of private security guards posted across the front entrance.

Several pickets pointed to the intimidatory presence of both the police and security guards and the high costs associated with the operation against their strike to defend pay and jobs.

One striker said: "We are being kettled here!"

The Tyseley yard is one of three depots, along with Perry Barr and Lifford Lane, where 350 refuse drivers and loaders who are members of Unite have taken indefinite strike action since March 11. They are opposing the abolition of the Grade 3 safety critical role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officers (WRCO), affecting 150 workers, which would slash pay between £2,000 and £8,000 a year and reduce crew sizes from four to three.

After three weeks, waste services had virtually ground to a halt across the city, with around 17,000 tonnes of rubbish accumulated on the streets. The Labour-run Birmingham City Council declared a "major incident" on March 31 to assume emergency powers to break the strike. This only went into full operation after Labour Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer greenlighted the clampdown in Parliament on April 3, followed by a visit to Birmingham the next day by Local Government Minister Jim McMahon.

The raft of measures has included drafting in agency

staff to man additional wagons, outsourcing services to private contractors and calls on neighbouring councils to provide additional support with waste clearance. This was taken up by Conservative-led Lichfield District Council. Pickets were dispersed by the police at the three depots under the threat of the draconian Section 14 of the Public Order Act 1986.

The WSWS article calling for a full mobilisation of the working class to defeat the state orchestrated attack explained: "The repressive measures against the Birmingham bin strike are aimed against the entire working class. Labour is seeking a precedent, making clear any section of workers who wage effective industrial action will face savage state repression."

Refuse workers spoke of how, as key workers, they had been vilified by Labour for opposing pay cuts which would leave them just above the minimum wage and in some cases at risk of losing their homes.

They rejected the claim that there was no money to provide for services or maintain their pay rate, pointing to the millions squandered on the strike-breaking operations by the Labour government, its flagship local authority and unelected commissioners to enforce £300 million worth of cuts on Britain's second largest city.

Refuse workers were angered by Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner's visit to Birmingham, the day prior, April 10. She toured a council waste recycling plant around the corner from the Atlas depot but did not come down to the picket line to speak with them.

Rayner was accompanied by the Labour leader of Birmingham City Council John Cotton and Local Government Minister McMahon. The BBC cited McMahon boasting that 120 wagons had completed their rounds on the day, compared with 20 a week ago.

Rayner said, “I would urge Unite to suspend the action and accept the improved deal.”

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham feigned outrage at “the constant attacks and briefings against these low paid bin workers,” but made no mention of any Labour cabinet minister. Instead, she stated that “it is helpful that the government finally realised after weeks that they have a role in this dispute”.

From the limited information provided in the press release over the revised proposed deal to end the strike—which Unite has agreed will be put to a vote on Monday—it is worse than that which refuse workers originally rejected. Graham stated that it offered only “partial pay protection for a few”, with the scrapping of the WRCO role. But she then confirmed, “For the drivers, they are still unaware what their drop in pay will be but the council has muted that this could also be around £8,000.”

As for her claim that workers are “in the driving seat” over whether to accept, the proposed deal has not even been seen yet. Strikers at the Atlas depot and other picket lines were informed on Friday morning by Unite National Lead Officer Onay Kasab that they and their colleagues should attend the union’s office in Birmingham on Monday to vote in the ballot, without being provided a written copy of the proposed deal—which they will not see until setting foot in the office.

News of the paltry offer for loaders and a new pay cut for drivers was met with anger and derision by strikers. Many said they would vote to reject. The drivers, they noted, had come out on strike to defend their colleagues under attack but were now facing a similar drastic cut in wages. Both loaders and drivers condemned the use of “divide and rule” tactics.

The latest rotten deal should be rejected. But the fact that it is even being put to a vote shows this is not only a fight against Labour, at local authority and government level, but against the isolation of the dispute by the Unite leadership under Graham.

The strikers have been told that after voting on Monday on the insulting deal, they should attend a rally on Tuesday outside Birmingham City Council House. This is to hand in a petition by Unite addressed to Labour council leader John Cotton and Head Commissioner Max Caller. This presents refuse workers as humble plaintiffs, stressing that “refuse

workers represented by Unite have worked with management in good faith to ensure services continue to operate despite detrimental impacts to their pay and conditions.”

This is not a perspective for a fight, but an attempt to appease Labour and cobble together a face-saving deal for the union bureaucracy to resume their normal services of policing the cuts.

As the WSWS has insisted: “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.”



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