

Birmingham bin workers vote to continue strike, defying Labour government clampdown

Robert Stevens
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On Monday, Birmingham refuse workers voted to continue industrial action against huge wage cuts and job losses. By a 97 percent majority, strikers rejected an offer even worse than one they rejected when they walked out indefinitely on March 11.

They are opposing Labour Party-run Birmingham City Council's (BCC) plan to abolish 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.

These attacks are being demanded by unelected commissioners appointed by Downing Street, who are ramming through £300 million in cuts for the UK's second largest city.

BCC's latest offer not only retained the original pay cuts against loaders, but would have meant up to 200 bin truck drivers facing pay cuts of thousands of pounds.

The No vote saw Unite the Union's leadership scrambling to save face, stating that workers' rejection of BCC's "totally inadequate offer" came as "no surprise".

Neither General Secretary Sharon Graham or National Lead Officer Onay Kasab could explain why they balloted members on such a savage and insulting offer. Their decision to do so was a political offering to the Starmer Labour government and BCC officials who have organised a strike-breaking operation while demanding their "good" deal be accepted.

The ballot was held over a few hours on Monday, and strikers were required to attend Unite's Birmingham headquarters to cast a vote. While BCC's offer was announced last Friday, strikers were not shown a copy ahead of the vote, with only a summary version available to view on Monday.

Following the deal's rejection, Kasab revealed that the offer included workers being offered lump-sum payments depending on length of service, described as

"compensation". But if workers had accepted, their basic pay would have fallen immediately by thousands of pounds.

Asked by reporters why "neither side are budging", Kasab replied: "Well, we have budged. First of all, we accepted the £1,000 cut before the strike action started [by cutting shift times]. So, we've already made concessions. To then ask people to take another cut is unreasonable."

Kasab said BCC's latest offer was "significantly far away from where we need to be", but said a new deal could be reached "within days". He insisted, "we want to end this as quickly as possible. We do not want it to go on for a single day longer."

The Birmingham strikers rejecting BCC's latest offer was a courageous act of defiance. On Monday, the right-wing *Telegraph* newspaper revealed the Labour government was on a war footing against the strike, with Local Government Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner using "formal powers known as Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (Maca) to summon Army experts..." A government spokesman said, "a small number of office-based military personnel with operational planning expertise have been made available to Birmingham City Council to further support in this area."

The newspaper cited "contingency plans in place to scale up the number of soldiers involved if necessary." The last time a government deployed military personnel was against striking HGV drivers in October 2021, amid a fuel crisis and inflationary pressures that produced a wave of industrial unrest.

On March 31, BCC declared a "major incident" empowering them to mobilise police to disperse pickets from the entrances at all three depots and allowing strike-breaking collection vehicles to pass unhindered, under threat from Section 14 of the Public Order Act (1986).

Labour's strike-breaking operation has been led from Downing Street. Police and security guards have been stationed permanently on picket lines, while agency staff

have been drafted in to man additional wagons. Neighbouring councils have been enlisted to provide additional waste clearance.

This has enabled the council to collect most of the 22,000 tonnes of waste accumulated citywide due to the strike. On Sunday, the council boasted, “Since Friday 4th April 2025, our clean-up crews across the city have collected 11,588 tonnes of waste” using “around 100-120 refuse collection vehicles” and “supported by extra vehicles through mutual aid.” BCC declared: “We predict we have around 4,500 tonnes left to clear up this week”.

On Tuesday, hundreds of strikers rallied outside Birmingham City Council House where they attempted to deliver a petition from Unite calling on council leaders to engage in “meaningful discussions”. But the doors of the council building were literally slammed in workers’ faces, forcing them to leave the petition in a box outside the building.

Strikers showed WSWS reporters a letter they received from Birmingham City Council, dated April 10, 2025, signed by Paul Tulett, Director of Employee and Industrial Relations. His letter warned: “investigations are underway regarding an incident you were allegedly involved in during the current period of industrial action.”

Failing to specify any wrongdoing, Tulett threatened, “Any picketing, as formed by the current industrial action, must be lawful and proportionate” and must be compliant with BCC’s “Values and Code of Conduct”.

He concluded: “We will write to you in due course to confirm if formal action is or is not being taken against you.”

The letter is a warning that BCC, backed by the Starmer government, is preparing the mass sacking of strikers.

Birmingham Live reported Monday that Craig Cooper, BCC’s strategic director of operations, “confirmed that [redundancy] consultation notices were issued as planned earlier this month to [an estimated 41] workers who had not yet accepted alternative roles, training or voluntary redundancy as a result of the move to delete the role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officer from the four man bins crew.”

Labour government Business and Trade Minister Sarah Jones spoke Tuesday of “other councils ... coming in to support” Birmingham council, and “logistical support from the Army” and “some private sector support... already there”. She declared, “Fundamentally what needs to happen now is the strike needs to be called off.”

In the face of this assault, Unite is refusing to mobilise its membership to back the Birmingham workers. Graham has instead insisted that the “The government must now call a meeting with the stakeholders to ensure these steps are taken

to bring the strike to an end.”

She stated, “Unite has set out simple and reasonable steps to the council to resolve these issues,” such as a restructuring of Birmingham council’s £3 billion debt burden. BCC has no intention of stepping back from their cost-cutting drive.

Kasab has made clear Unite will abide by the police’s prevention of strikers’ “go-slow” tactics which had previously delayed bin collections. “We will be cooperating and acting lawfully with the police,” he told *Birmingham Live*.

Unite’s servile adherence to the anti-strike laws must be challenged.

For decades, Unite, the GMB, and every other union, has claimed the election of Labour governments would lead to the repeal of the anti-strike and Public Order legislation making effective industrial action almost impossible. But under the Blair and Brown Labour governments (1997-2010) and now under Starmer, these laws are being pressed into service. Graham and Kasab—like the rest of the trade union bureaucracy—refuse to challenge the anti-strike laws because they serve a useful purpose: suppressing industrial action and allowing top officials to deepen their corporatist partnership with government and big business.

The Socialist Equality Party urges the formation of a rank-and-file strike committee by bin workers to break Unite’s isolation of their dispute.

Delegations must be organised to visit workplaces, starting with an appeal to refuse and council workers across the UK to put a halt to scabbing and for joint action to fight the council cuts throwing millions into social distress.

Such an appeal would resonate widely among workers who want to fight a despised Starmer government intent on imposing austerity to fund military rearmament and war.

To discuss the formation of a rank-and-file committee contact the SEP on the form below.



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