

# Labour council demands Unite accept surrender deal already rejected by Birmingham bin workers

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On Wednesday talks resumed between the Labour Party-run city council and Unite the union aimed at ending the five-week indefinite strike by more than 350 Birmingham refuse workers battling major pay cuts and jobs losses.

The description of the talks as “negotiations” is a misnomer. They are being held under the shadow of an escalating strikebreaking operation by Birmingham City Council (BCC), backed by the Starmer Labour government.

BCC declared a “major incident” on March 31, drafting in agency workers to man scab refuse lorries, and employing private contractors and additional support from neighbouring councils. Police dispersed pickets at all three depots and kettled them behind steel barriers under the threat of having Section 14 of the Public Order Act (1986) used against them.

BCC’s anti-strike measures swung into operation after Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer gave the green light in parliament on April 2, denouncing the strike as “unacceptable” and assuring BCC it had the government’s full support. On Monday, it was confirmed that Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner had agreed the deployment of army planners to co-ordinate every aspect of its strikebreaking operation.

Rayner’s visit to Birmingham last Thursday, alongside Labour council leader John Cotton and Local Government Minister Jim McMahon, was to demand that bin workers end their strike and accept an “improved offer” from BCC announced that day.

Workers defied this political intimidation, rejecting BCC’s “good deal” by a 97 percent majority in a ballot

organised by Unite on Monday.

The deal upheld the scrapping of the safety-critical Grade 3 Waste Recycling and Collection Officers (WRCO) role, with pay cuts of up to £8,000 that would eliminate around 150 jobs and reduce the size of crews from four to three. It included plans to cut wages by a similar amount for drivers, who had come out on strike in support of the loaders.

The inducement of a one-off lump sum payment of up to £17,000 aimed at driving a wedge between loaders and drivers was rejected.

Unite organised a rally on Tuesday outside Birmingham Council House to hand in a petition addressed to Cotton and Max Caller, head of the unelected commission which is overseeing £300 million of cuts. Unite’s petition called on the pair to “Back Birmingham’s Refuse Workers.” BCC representatives refused to accept the petition from bin workers, slamming the door in their faces.

Cotton declared ahead of Wednesday’s renewed “negotiations” with Unite that BCC officials were not prepared to “cross our red lines” over axing the WRCO role. He stated the role was “redundant.” In an interview with *Birmingham Live* he confirmed that every role in the council was “being re-evaluated,” confirming that the attack on bin workers is the thin edge of the wedge.

Despite declaring bankruptcy, BCC has received a blank cheque from central government to cover the costs of its strikebreaking operation. Cotton stated, “We are now in a position to clean up because we have been able to get over 100 vehicles out daily thanks in part to support from other local authorities.” He boasted that more waste was being collected than

before the strike began.

The effectiveness of BCC's strikebreaking measures is the responsibility of Unite, which has isolated the 350 Birmingham refuse workers. Unite has issued no call to mobilise its million-plus members to defeat an assault that establishes a benchmark for slashing jobs, pay and conditions and suppressing strikes.

Birmingham refuse workers are defending their own "red lines," refusing to accept BCC's cost-cutting drive. But Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has dropped her previous criticism of Rayner and other Labour cabinet ministers who have denounced the strike and backed the repressive measures against it. Graham said this week that she "welcomed" the Labour government's intervention.

On Wednesday, talks broke down again, with Unite objecting that council negotiators refused to put in writing claims that Cotton made in the media that no-one would lose pay, that WRCO workers transferred to a new grade would not lose pay in the long-term, and that drivers would not lose pay by being downgraded.

Graham stated in Unite's latest press release, "We appear to be in parallel universe. Yet again John Cotton is saying one thing in public, while his local officers are saying another in the negotiating room and in writing. If the council puts in writing what it says in public then we would be much closer to a deal."

This is the nub for Unite, and a warning that its top officials are prepared to accept the terms dictated by Cotton and the Labour council to permanently remove the position of WRCO, eliminate pay progression for loaders, and reduce crew sizes by a quarter.

References by Unite to ensuring pay protection for WRCO workers "moving sideways" into new jobs or receiving "a one-off payment of £16,000" to cover just two years' loss of £8,000 in pay cuts, is to facilitate the brutal restructuring and demobilise workers' opposition.

Birmingham's refuse workers have beaten back previous attempts to remove the WRCO role with strike action in 2019, but Unite has accepted one concession after another on pay and conditions, including a £1,000 cut in shift allowance, before the recent dispute.

There can be no defeat of the cuts to drivers' pay and the downgrading of roles being planned throughout Birmingham City Council without opposing the elimination of the role of WRCO. This means a fight

against the corporatist alliance between Unite, the Labour council and the Starmer government.

An editorial in today's *Guardian* newspaper calling for a funding deal to end the dispute reveals something of the backroom discussions underway—at workers' expense. The editorial states: "The government has urged Unite to accept the latest council offer aimed at ending the dispute, which includes a commitment to redeployment and a voluntary redundancy scheme."

As for Unite's proposals, championed by Graham, for a "debt restructuring," the *Guardian* wholeheartedly agrees. Its statement on the matter constitutes a sharp warning to Birmingham strikers: "Unite's proposal that the city council's huge debt should be restructured—allowing at least a softer version of austerity going forward—would offer a better solution if Westminster were willing to listen."

Birmingham bin workers have not taken weeks of all-out strike action to win "a softer version of austerity." They are fighting to defeat the ruthless austerity measures against them. Unite's "debt restructuring" proposals are no different in principle from similar schemes imposed on the poorest countries in the world by the International Monetary Fund, in which debt repayments are reduced in return for an agreed programme of cuts, lumbering these countries with higher long-term interest repayments and locking them into a cycle of worsening poverty and social misery.

The corporatist strategy of Unite must be defeated. Against their efforts to impose a sellout deal with BCC and the Labour government, workers must strike out on a new road. Create a rank-and-file strike committee and appeal for the broadest mobilisation of council workers in Birmingham and across the UK to defeat the Labour government's strikebreaking operation and its imposition of austerity to pay for militarism and war!



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