

The Birmingham bin workers fight and the lessons of the 2022-23 strike wave

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Britain's ruling class is voicing concerns over the eruption of mass struggles by the working class against the widely despised Starmer Labour government.

Fears have focused on the Birmingham bin workers' strike, now in its fifth week. The bin workers are fighting massive wage cuts, attacks on conditions and job destruction by Labour-run Birmingham City Council (BCC) and unelected commissioners.

The Starmer Labour government has responded with a strike-breaking operation, working with BCC officials to mobilise police, security guards and army planners to coordinate scabbing by private contractors supported by neighbouring councils.

Strikers are being threatened under Section 14 of the Public Order Act, punishable with jail terms, for peaceful picketing. Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner has invoked powers under Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) allowing the government to call in the army.

Media headlines have included: "Labour faces summer of union discontent" (*Telegraph*); "Summer of discontent looms as bins burst and unions back in charge" (*Express*) "Is Britain heading for a summer of discontent?" (*Times*).

The summer of discontent is a stock reference to the 1978-79 "Winter of Discontent", which saw millions of days of strike action during the Labour government of James Callaghan.

The capitalist press warns there is a danger the bin strikes will spark broader struggles against councils, many run by Labour, imposing austerity just as vicious as Birmingham's £300 million cuts.

Presently, the right-wing media points to a small number of existing strikes and those scheduled by university workers and civil servants. But they warn these could soon mushroom. Ballots for strike action by council workers, school and higher education staff, and NHS workers, are pending.

Media references to the danger of a summer/autumn/winter of discontent are not new, but over the past decade and a half they were made under the Tories.

The Birmingham strike is viewed with particular concern because it is the first major struggle by workers against a Labour government. The ruling class correctly anticipates that Starmer cannot enforce Labour's austerity agenda without provoking mass opposition.

Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves have pledged to enforce the most savage austerity measures in the post-war period, destroying what remains of the NHS and the welfare state to pour hundreds of billions into rearmament and war, including leading a "Coalition of the Willing" against Russia.

If Starmer and Rayner have intervened to savagely break a strike by 350 council workers in Birmingham, it is because they fear a broader challenge in the working class to their government's plans.

The union bureaucracy insists that broader strike action in support of the Birmingham bin workers cannot be organised due to anti-union laws, rejecting any challenge to their imposition by this hated government. However, it is not the anti-strike laws they fear but a challenge to them by their members that would win mass popular support. They view the anti-strike laws as a valuable instrument reinforcing their own efforts to police the class struggle.

Lessons of the 2022-23 strike wave

Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper has depicted unions as being "back in the saddle" after more than a decade of Tory rule, supposedly chomping at the bit and launching fights on every front. Unite leader Sharon Graham and National Education Union (NEU) leader Daniel Kabede--described a "hard left dolt"--are portrayed as militant stalwarts locked in mortal combat with Starmer.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Britain's union leaders are not "laying the groundwork for widespread strikes" (*Telegraph*), they are doing everything possible to

isolate, divide and suppress them.

The *Telegraph* cites Graham's declamations that Birmingham could "absolutely" spread to the rest of the country, but Unite is neck-deep in talks with BCC and the Labour government on a "debt restructuring" programme that would preserve the central thrust of Labour's cuts.

The union bureaucracy is not in conflict with the Starmer government, but in *partnership with it*. This is true whatever critical noises bureaucrats like Graham and Kabede make to maintain political credibility among their members.

Workers should draw the necessary lessons of the strike wave that broke out in the summer of 2022 that lasted until the early months of 2024.

More than a decade of austerity following the 2008 global financial meltdown, combined with mass death in the pandemic and rising inflation, produced a resurgence of the class struggle in Britain and internationally, ending a decades-long period of strike-suppression by the trade union bureaucracy.

But the potential of this movement was stifled. The bureaucracy worked to divide workers' incipient rebellion, ensuring that strikes by rail workers, bus drivers, post and warehouse workers, teachers and lecturers, NHS workers, HGV drivers and oil rig workers, remained divided.

"Left-wing" officials led by Mick Lynch, Dave Ward and Graham, pursued a twin strategy of 1) curtailing the strike movement while they negotiated behind the scenes with Tory ministers to enforce below-inflation wage deals, and 2) championing the election of a Labour government that would supposedly end 14 years of Tory austerity.

The role of "lefts" like Lynch was crucial under conditions where Starmer was denouncing strikes by rail, postal and public sector workers and banning Labour shadow ministers from visiting picket lines.

Lynch, who imposed sellout pay deals against his own members, called on workers hesitant about voting for Starmer to "grow up a bit" as Labour was the only alternative.

The trade union bureaucracy and Labour Party are two wings of the same pro-capitalist apparatus that is the mortal enemy of the working class. Indeed, one of Starmer's main differences with his Tory predecessors was over their failure to recognise the key role played by the union leaders in suppressing the working class and his pledge that Labour would implement an industrial strategy based on structured (corporatist) collusion between government, employers and the union apparatus.

Today Rayner—championed then by union officials as the most sympathetic voice in Starmer's shadow cabinet for her proposed Workers Rights Bill—is directly organising the police and military planners against the Birmingham bin

strike. And the union bureaucracy's efforts to suppress the class struggle continue unabated.

The NEU leadership has responded to the overwhelming vote by teachers to reject the government's 2.8 percent pay offer and their indicative call for strikes by putting off any formal ballot for industrial action until the autumn, amid futile pleas for the government to "reconsider".

More than 10,000 jobs are being axed throughout the higher education sector. But while isolated strikes have broken out at a handful of universities, no coordinated action is being organised by the University and College Union.

The bureaucracy hovers over the class struggle like the grim reaper, moving in to sabotage and strangle every strike.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes those pseudo-left tendencies such as the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and Revolutionary Communist Party who claim mass pressure from below will force the trade union officials to fight and lead opposition to the Labour government's cuts. Faced with opposition from below, the union apparatus will only deepen its collusion with Starmer, the state apparatus and corporate management.

The incomes of leading union officials such as Graham, Kebede and Ward place them in the top five percent of income earners. To preserve their privileged existence as partners of the Starmer government and big business is their sole priority.

The working class must strike out on a new road, break the grip of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and build new organisations of class struggle—rank-and-file committees. This will enable workers to coordinate their struggles across workplaces, industries and even national boundaries, to share information and organise resistance to the dictates of the global financial oligarchy and its plundering of society's wealth. The SEP is fighting to build a new socialist and revolutionary leadership in the working class fight for this.



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