

Birmingham bin workers strike enters eighth week, Labour council demands driver pay cuts

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The all-out strike by Birmingham bin workers has entered its eighth week. Around 350 refuse workers, bin loaders and drivers, walked out on March 11 to oppose massive pay cuts, ending the safety-critical Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) role and the downgrading of crew sizes by a quarter.

The workers are fighting Labour-led Birmingham City Council (BCC) and its unelected commissioners, backed by a Labour government in Downing Street determined to impose a crushing defeat, paving the way for a renewed austerity offensive on local authorities across the UK.

Last week, the Unite union representing the bin workers entered talks with the council organised by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)—the graveyard of industrial action.

There is no compromise on offer. Unite entered ACAS talks despite the council insisting that it would not only impose its original plans against the loaders but also slash the pay rate of refuse truck drivers by a fifth.

The 200 drivers are currently employed in Grade 4 roles but are to be regraded to Grade 3. Driver team leaders currently earn between £33,366 and £40,476 a year. These rates will be cut to between £26,409 and £32,654.

Unite's statement in response ended with the words of national lead officer Onay Kasab: "Today's announcement makes it clear the council have been playing games. It has had no intention of resolving this dispute and protecting workers, this is all about cutting workers' pay and plunging them into financial misery."

Yet Unite is still holed up in ACAS with the council's representatives. It is intent on ending the

strike, having already declared in public it accepts the WRCO role will be ended.

ACAS, largely funded by the Department for Business and Trade, is designed to strangle workers' struggles, with the help of experienced trade union bureaucrats. For six years from 2014–2020, it was led by former General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress Brendan Barber, now ennobled in the House of Lords as The Lord Barber of Ainsdale.

Current ACAS chair Clare Chapman, a former Group HR Director at the UK's largest supermarket chain, Tesco, noted that in the year to July 2024, ACAS "brokered confidential talks in more than 600 collective disputes, almost half of which involved threatened or actual industrial action. A positive outcome [invariably meaning ending a strike on the employers' terms] was secured in more than nine out of ten."

Birmingham drivers speaking to the local media and on social media have explained how brutal the new cuts are and their determination to resist. Several who had been working during the strike have now joined the picket lines at the three depots in the city.

One driver, who stands to lose £177 a week, told *Birmingham Live*, "I was stupid enough to believe the council when they told us we would not be affected... There goes any holidays, any savings I might make. Others have it a lot worse, they are worried about whether they will be able to carry on with their mortgage or rent, or a car loan. It's a lot of money to have at risk. I couldn't sleep last night for worrying about it."

A bin worker in his 50s described the pressure of the job, saying, "We drive around parts of Birmingham where the cars are double parked, and we have maybe a

two-inch gap either side to get this huge truck down.

“People really have no idea what the job is like; it’s not like driving around in a small van. These are potentially killing machines.”

The Labour authority’s determination to create a low-paid workforce is clear, with *Birmingham Live* reporting May 1, “the council has reopened its voluntary redundancy offer to all Grade 4 drivers and Grade 2 loaders this week.”

From the beginning of the strike, Unite has refused to organise its more than one million membership—including thousands employed in local authority street cleansing, waste management and recycling—in defence of the Birmingham strikers. The union leadership did nothing to fight the imposition of police-and security-manned barricades at depot gates by the council—to stop effective picketing from continuing—under “major incident” powers.

This has prompted the claim from various pseudo-left tendencies—the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and Revolutionary Communist Party—in alliance with the Strike Map group, that mass pressure from below will force trade union officials, including Unite leader Sharon Graham, to fight and lead an opposition to the Labour government’s cuts.

A “Mega picket” has been organised for Friday, May 9 to be held at one of the Birmingham bin depots, Lifford Lane.

As the council steps up its offensive, the Birmingham strikers will welcome the presence of many other workers and supporters on their picket lines. But from the standpoint of the pseudo-left organisations the event is designed solely to prop up the tattered authority of trade union leaders who have a long record of sellouts—including the betrayal of every single dispute during the 2022-24 strike wave.

This is why the event has attracted the left-talking representatives of the trade union and Labour bureaucracy for whom the Birmingham strike has become a cause célèbre. Attending the mass picket will be Daniel Kebede, National Education Union general secretary; Mick Whelan, leader of the train drivers union Aslef; and Steve Wright, general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union.

In the May 4 *Socialist Worker*, the SWP declared, “the ‘mega picket’ outside the Lifford Lane depot will be a show of strength against the strike-breaking

operation.

“Mass numbers can stop the vehicles going out and persuade workers not to work.”

This hides the fact that Unite, which the SWP piece does not mention, has prevented a fight against the strikebreaking operation. In the words of Kasab, a leading backer of the Socialist Party, speaking as the council forcibly prevented picketing, “We will be cooperating and acting lawfully with the police.”

As an example of a successful mass picket, *Socialist Worker* offers the 1993 Timex factory dispute in Dundee. But that was proof of the role played by the trade union bureaucracy in isolating workers and leading them to defeat.

As soon as the Timex strike began, the company went to the Court of Session and won an interdict against the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union forbidding any more than six striking workers on the picket line.

Rather than oppose this and demand the Trades Union Congress, Scottish Trade Union Congress and their affiliated unions fight for an end to the anti-strike laws—including those banning secondary action—the AEEU switched to “mass meetings” outside the factory gates to avoid a confrontation. No solidarity strikes were called by other unions and the Timex strikers were subsequently locked out. Despite several mass pickets involving thousands, the factory closed six months later, with 340 jobs lost.

There is not a trace of genuine solidarity in the appearance of trade union bureaucrats at a “mega picket”. Without the organisation of collective industrial action (requiring joint defiance of the anti-strike laws), their messages of unity and resistance are a fraud.



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