

End isolation of Birmingham bin workers' strike: Build rank-and-file opposition to Starmer's strike breaking and austerity cuts

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The strike by Birmingham bin workers is in its tenth week. But their defiant stand to defend jobs and oppose drastic pay cuts has been isolated by the Unite trade union.

The 350 refuse drivers and loaders face an unprecedented strike-breaking operation by Labour-led Birmingham City Council (BCC), its unelected commissioners, that is backed to the hilt by the Starmer government.

Labour Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's aim is to impose a crushing defeat to set a precedent for imposing savage austerity across UK local authorities.

Unite is in closed-door talks with the Labour council via ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service). But the council has not only confirmed that it will abolish the Waste Recycle and Collection Officer (WRCO) role—the core issue triggering the strike. On April 29, it also confirmed that refuse drivers face a similar downgrade and pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year. The ACAS talks can only lay the groundwork for a miserable sellout.

The May 9 “mega-picket” at Lifford Lane, one of the three council depots where Birmingham bin workers are striking, was organised by the Strike Map group and built by the pseudo-left groups organised through their networking activity, resulted in a turnout of 400. The *Socialist Worker* hailed it as a show of strength by the trade unions against Starmer. But as the WSW reported, “The stage-managed “mega picket” provided an opportunity for union leaders to pose before the cameras with their hollow declarations of solidarity, while surrender terms are plotted behind closed doors at ACAS.”

None of the left talking union leaders billed as keynote speakers proposed anything to defeat the Starmer government's strike breaking. Instead, they all appealed for Labour “to do the right thing” and get around the negotiating table to discuss Graham's proposal for a “debt restructuring plan” that would implement cuts over a slightly more protracted timeframe.

No union leader is genuinely opposed to Labour's cuts. They only want to manage them in partnership with the government, at the expense of the workers they claim to represent and vital public services.

The Lifford Lane depot was closed Friday due to the mega-picket, but BCC boasted of resumed collections across all depots the next day. Labour-led Coventry City Council is aiding BCC's operations under “major incident” powers that Birmingham's leaders assumed to seek outside support.

This is a direct consequence of Unite's previous sellout in Coventry in 2022, where action by 73 refuse drivers over pay was isolated in the face of a six month strike-breaking operation by the Labour authority. This was ended by an ACAS-brokered agreement based on all the council's demands, including major job losses aimed at senior staff and pay restraint with increments tied to weekend working.

Unite and the GMB union are sitting on the potential for a far wider fightback among refuse and council workers. The *Independent* ran with an article in mid-April headlined, “Is a bin strike coming to your area?”

This referred to a report from the National Audit Office that half of councils in England are facing bankruptcy—as Birmingham, the second largest city in the UK declared in September 2023 as it makes £300 million of cuts over two years. Warnings of a Section 114 notice—effectively declaring bankruptcy—had been issued by councils in Warrington, North Somerset, Cheshire East, Dudley and Kirklees.

This comes after more than more than a decade of austerity in which central government funding was slashed by up to 60 percent under the Conservatives. The Starmer government is deepening this austerity drive through a renewed assault on council workers' jobs and conditions and further dismantling of essential services.

Unite and the GMB work to prevent a unified fightback, making sure that their members' resistance is barely reported, tightly reined in and kept isolated.

In Peterborough, the GMB employed the full bureaucratic playbook to avert strike action over an insulting pay offer from the Labour-led authority for its outsourced arm, Peterborough Limited.

Council workers in waste management, street cleaning, libraries, museums and leisure centres rejected an original offer for 2024-25 that the union described as “just a 2.25 per cent pay rise above the increase required to maintain the legal minimum pay for lowest-paid workers.”

The GMB only held an indicative ballot for industrial action in December, which returned a mandate of 78 percent in favour. After a further low-ball offer was rejected in February, the GMB pushed through a settlement of just 3.6 percent in April declaring it “the best possible offer.”

Unite has isolated the fight of 78 refuse department workers in Sheffield who have engaged in continuous strike action since August last year, demanding union recognition at the Lumley Street depot operated by Veolia. The Paris-based transnational is contracted to run waste and recycling services by the local authority, currently under no overall party control but led by Labour councillor Tom Hunt.

Veolia reaped £11.7 million profits from the contract in 2023 while Sheffield City Council faces a budget deficit of £18.1 million.

The GMB signed a sweetheart deal with Veolia in 2004, three years after services were contracted out, as the sole union with collective bargaining rights. This relationship has led workers at the Lumley Street depot to turn away from the GMB, particularly after a series of below-inflation pay deals over the last four years based on demobilising strike action. Unite reported last August that it represented 80 percent of the workforce. In March a petition was signed by 150 workers at the depot for the recognition of Unite, including by members of the GMB and non-union workers, out of the 224 workers employed at the yard.

However, Unite has not organised any action among its broader membership to uphold the rights of workers at the Lumley yard, including at Veolia sites across the country where it is recognised. Its “good faith” approach with Veolia ended predictably with the company backing out from a drafted agreement last December. The GMB had raised a counter-dispute with the Trades Union Congress and Veolia.

Workers fighting for their basic right have instead been diverted down the path of Unite’s usual “leverage campaign”—lobbying the company headquarters, shareholders and business partners of Veolia including Sheffield City Council. It made an application for union recognition with the government body, the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC), which was rejected on April 3 in favour of Veolia maintaining the status quo with the GMB.

Whether it is the GMB defending grubby sweetheart deals or Unite stepping in, bitter experience shows that a genuine and united fight against the employers is only possible if the working class is able to mobilise independently of the pro-corporate union apparatus.

The trade union leaders backed the election of a Labour government with the false promise that it would bring relief from 14 years of Conservative rule—promoting its Employment Rights Bill as defanging anti-strike legislation and restoring workers’ rights. Presented last October, it is not due to complete its passage for another two years having already been gutted following heavy vetting by big business.

In the first major strike to challenge the Labour government by the 350 Birmingham bin workers, Starmer has surpassed anything attempted by the Conservatives, organising agency workers as a strike-breaking force and threatening to use Section 14 of the Public Order Act, punishable by fines and imprisonment, to disperse pickets.

In the fight against Starmer’s repressive measures workers need to break the grip of its bureaucratic partners in the trade unions and build rank-and-file committees as new organisations of class struggle. 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 corporate oligarchy and its plundering of society’s wealth.



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