

# Unite's Sharon Graham admits ACAS talks over Birmingham bin strike were a fraud

**Tony Robson**  
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Unite union General Secretary Sharon Graham has admitted that its talks with Birmingham City Council (BCC) were a sham. Graham stated in a Unite press release on Wednesday 21, “The talks, which started on 1 May under the auspices of the conciliation service ACAS, set out a clear timeline for the discussed offer (known as the ballpark offer) to be tabled by the council.

“This offer is still not with the union. Indeed, the receipt deadline agreed with ACAS has been broken three times.”

The WSWS warned when Unite entered talks that the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service is a government funded mechanism for suppressing workers' struggles in favour of the employer. Moreover, “There is no compromise on offer. Unite entered ACAS talks despite the council insisting that it would impose its original plans against the loaders but also slash the pay rate of refuse truck drivers by a fifth.”

Graham now writes that a “fair and reasonable offer” never existed, after keeping Birmingham strikers in the dark for three weeks. The wall of silence has been broken only to complain that no proposal has been forthcoming which could justify a sellout.

Defiant pickets of loaders and refuse truck drivers have continued to face a strike breaking operation which has involved drafting agency workers in as a substitute workforce and support from private contractors and neighbouring councils. In the past week there has been an increased police presence to ensure scab trucks leave the yards. This has been backed and coordinated by the Starmer government as the dispute enters its eleventh week.

The “ballpark” figure means an improved short term financial compensation for loaders to scrap the role of

Waste Recycle and Collection Officers (WRCO). The defence of the safety critical job, which would reduce refuse crew sizes by a quarter, triggered the indefinite strike on March 11.

Unite are now seeking only improved lump sum payments for workers losing up to £8,000 a year. BCC has pressed ahead with its ultimatum of redeployment in a similarly paid role, retraining or redundancy. As loaders have pointed out they are not even safe from a further downgrade if redeployed, as the plans for their driver colleagues already demonstrate. The attack is to spearhead a downgrading of council workers across BCC.

There are around 200 refuse truck drivers who have been on strike alongside loaders now facing a similar downgrade and loss of between £8,000 to £10,000 a year. On the picket line on Wednesday, drivers reported that they had received emails from BCC offering voluntary redundancy (VR). One told *Birmingham Live*, “Emails have been going out (within the last week) with figures.

“They (the council) are trying to break the strike that way by offering the VR. They are rushing it through. I just think they are trying to reduce the numbers on the picket lines.

“Some of these workers are long term. Some might take it (if they are near retirement), but it all depends on individual circumstances.”

## **Graham seeks partnership with, not opposition to Starmer**

These intimidatory tactics by BCC would have no

traction if it were not for the isolation of the strike and acceptance of the cost cutting by Unite's leadership.

The defence of frontline jobs and opposition to drastic reductions in pay cannot be entrusted to union officials prepared to sit down with strike breakers and negotiate "debt restructuring" with a Starmer government which champions Thatcherite austerity and uses the most repressive measures against workers to enforce it.

The Unite press release was used as another PR stunt by Graham to supposedly shame the Labour government. But her faux outrage is only to place the fate of Birmingham bin workers in the hands of their bitterest enemy.

The Labour leader of BCC John Cotton and Deputy Prime Minister Angela Raynor are criticised for blocking "a deal", when it was the Starmer's number two who brought in army planners to coordinate the strikebreaking.

Graham's political dissembling is to dampen down a far broader current of opposition to the Starmer government by workers. She asks, "If Labour is truly the party for workers, how can this government be aiding and abetting these cuts and once again allowing workers and communities to pay the price?"

The verdict is in on whether Labour is a workers' party or not. Starmer heads a government of Thatcherite warmongers, determined to slash jobs, wages and working conditions as they gut and privatise essential social services. A local dispute has been catapulted onto the national stage because the government's flagship local authority is imposing the policy of "fire and rehire." And they are working with the trade union bureaucracy to do so, relying on Unite to uphold the anti-strike laws maintaining the isolation of Birmingham bin workers.

The Labour council in Britain's second largest city is imposing £300 million cuts to dismantle vital services, after declaring bankruptcy in 2023. Half the councils in England are also on the brink of bankruptcy, after more than a decade of austerity which has seen central government funding reduced by up to 60 percent.

A fight against the downgrading of frontline workers by the Starmer government and the escalation of savage austerity would therefore win widespread support, not just among refuse and other council workers but the entire working class.

## No confidence in Unite, establish a rank-and-file strike committee

Graham's admission that the ACAS talks have been a total failure should be met with a vote of no confidence in the Unite leadership which led workers down this blind path. Birmingham bin workers must take control of their own dispute by forming a rank-and-file strike committee made up of trusted fighters at all three depots

The conspiracy at ACAS, which Graham calls "playing games", must be ended with direct oversight of all further negotiations with BCC. This should start with bin workers drawing up their own demands, starting with the defence of the WRCO safety critical role and no compromise over the downgrading facing refuse truck drivers.

Delegations from the strike committee should reach out to other refuse workers, including at Veolia in Sheffield where refuse workers are fighting for Unite the union's recognition as they seek to oppose the sweetheart deal with the GMB, and to appeal at other depots to boycott any assistance with the scabbing operation. This can become the spearhead of a broader fightback against the local council and the Starmer government, waged through the formation of a network of similar rank-and-file committees that can bring an end to the sabotage and collusion of union leaders such as Graham.



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