

Birmingham bin workers strike: The lessons so far and the way forward

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The all-out strike action since March 11 by over 350 bin workers in Birmingham reached a landmark of 100 days on Wednesday.

The unified action by loaders and refuse drivers is to oppose job losses and pay cuts of up to £8,000–£10,000 respectively. It has pitted a militant section of frontline workers against Labour’s Birmingham City Council (BCC), led by John Cotton, working with unelected commissioners to implement £300 million in cuts across local services. Keir Starmer’s Labour government has overseen the strike-busting operation in the UK’s second city.

With an emphatic mandate in June to extend the action, it is critical to draw lessons and open a new path of struggle.

The defiant stand by the bin workers is endangered by the continued isolation of their struggle by Unite under General Secretary Sharon Graham, which has done nothing to organise its million-strong membership against Labour’s strikebreaking. It has also moved the goalposts from workers defeating the scrapping of the Grade 3 safety-critical role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) to negotiating over short-term compensation payments in exchange for cutting around 150 jobs and reducing crew sizes by a quarter.

End the secret negotiations

There must be an end to the secret negotiations between Unite officials and BCC. Workers waging this struggle must determine its outcome with direct oversight over negotiations and by drawing up non-negotiable demands to prevent any sacrifice of jobs, pay and safety. Cotton has not budged an inch on his “red lines” to eliminate the WRCO role and stated that every role across the local authority workforce is under review.

On April 14, bin workers voted by 97 percent to throw out a “partial” offer which was worse than what they had

rejected already. In addition to scrapping the WRCO role, 200 refuse drivers were informed they faced a similar downgrade in pay.

Loaders rejected the bribe of a lump sum payment of up to £17,000 and the deliberate attempt to drive a wedge in the strike. It was only after the rejection that Unite National Officer Onay Kasab stated that workers had “seen through what this so-called proposal meant”, after bowing to the pressure of Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner to ballot on the “improved offer.”

Since May 1, Unite has parked the dispute at ACAS, the government-backed arbitration service for ending strikes on employers’ terms, claiming a deal was “in touching distance”. After three weeks of silence Graham then issued a statement to say no new offer had even been tabled.

On May 31, a Unite press release reported a “watered-down proposal” had been received that failed to meet even the “ballpark” figure discussed at ACAS, blaming Cotton and the commissioners who remained outside the talks. The Unite leadership’s concern is that the present offer is too meagre to dress up as anything other than abject surrender.

After promising a detailed response ahead of new ACAS talks, Unite has issued none publicly. Instead, the union apparatus has waged a PR campaign with billboards and newspaper adverts to campaign for Cotton to be brought into the talks. This is a pathetic attempt to claim the strikebreaker in chief can be turned into an honest broker.

Oppose Labour’s strikebreaking operation

Unite’s leadership is mounting a damage limitation exercise on behalf of a Labour government faced with the first major industrial dispute since coming to office last July.

A driver told the WSWs, “They are too close to Labour. What constitutes a victory for Unite at national level will not

be a victory for us.”

A loader facing the loss of their WRCO role said, “We’re striking to keep our terms and conditions. For me it’s never been about compensation. We’re told Labour stands for social justice and workers’ rights, but that’s not what we see. Starmer is an enemy of the people.”

These sentiments are shared by millions, but Unite has prevented Birmingham bin workers from reaching out and turning this opposition into an organised force to close down the strikebreaking operation.

Unite has fully complied with the indefinite High Court injunction against mass picketing and refused to oppose the earlier threats made under the Public Order Act of fines and imprisonment for peaceful, effective action at the three council yards.

A war chest has been provided to fund the recruitment of a replacement workforce of agency workers manning council waste wagons, backed by additional support from private contractors and neighbouring councils, including Labour-led Coventry. The bill for policing the dispute is over £1 million.

Solidarity action must be organised to end the strikebreaking in Birmingham that sets a precedent against every section of workers in their own struggles against the austerity drive of the Starmer government.

To mobilise support from their real allies, Birmingham bin workers must reject the PR stunts staged by Graham and the national leadership on behalf of Labour. This was on full display at a rally outside parliament on June 16.

Although billed as part of Unite’s national campaign “Fair Funding for Local Government,” it only intended to organise a turnout of “over 50 council workers” which included a contingent of the Birmingham striking bin workers.

The event made a mockery of the union’s claim it was putting councils and Labour “on notice” against the cuts, with more than half the local authorities in England facing bankruptcy ravaged by the same cuts as Birmingham and central government grants slashed by up to 60 percent in over a decade of austerity. Instead, Graham’s message was “Labour—make the right choices. And show workers who side you are on.”

There were the usual chants of “They say cutback, we say fightback,” but this was empty rhetoric. After reeling off that Britain was the sixth richest economy in the world and a one percent wealth tax would net £25 billion a year, Graham got down to the real business at hand, stating, “Unite’s campaign is calling for Labour to restructure the debt, or better still get rid of it altogether.”

There is not a semblance of opposition in the call “for debt restructuring”. It is a repackaging of austerity based on a more attritional approach, with the trade union bureaucracy

acting as the industrial police force of the Starmer government to demobilise workers’ opposition. It would neither abolish the debt nor end the cuts even if carried out.

Form a rank-and-file strike committee

Birmingham bin workers have not waged an all-out strike to accept a repackaged version of austerity. For their fight to succeed, the stranglehold of the Unite leadership must be broken.

A rank-and-file strike committee needs to be formed of Birmingham workers at all three depots so that any further any further talks can be placed under the direct oversight of workers themselves.

The committee should set down non-negotiable demands that should include:

- Full defence of the WRCO role
- No downgrading of driver positions
- No redundancies
- Restoration of all lost pay
- An end to the legal intimidation and withdrawal of injunction

A committee must reach out to other refuse workers—including in neighbouring councils and private firms like Veolia in Sheffield—and call for opposition to the scabbing operation. Links must be built with other public sector workers facing similar attacks.

To those who want to take up such a fight, the Socialist Equality Party offers our full support and any assistance we can give. **Fill out the form below to get in touch.**



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