Support striking Veolia bin workers in Sheffield: Build a rank-and-file committee!

Tony Robson, Harvey Thompson
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Refuse workers at Veolia's Lumley Street depot in Sheffield are marking the eleventh month of their strike with a "mega-picket" this Wednesday.

They are fighting to secure the basic right for recognition of the union of their choice— Unite—to negotiate their pay and terms. This right has been denied by Veolia, contracted by the Labour-led authority to run waste and recycling services, and by the government body, the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC).

The action taken since last August by around 70 refuse workers poses the need to take a new path of struggle to overcome their near year-long isolation. As in every serious fight, a determined and principled stand can ignite a much wider movement of the working class against poverty wages and exploitation. The intolerable regime imposed in many workplaces is inseparable from the decimation of frontline services, driven by austerity and profiteering by private contractors.

Veolia, a Paris-based transnational corporation, rakes in £815 million annually in global profits, much of it from public contracts like the one in Sheffield. It reportedly made £11.7 million in profit from its operations in Sheffield in 2023. The council, meanwhile, faces a budget shortfall of approximately £20 million.

In April, the CAC ruled in favour of maintaining the single-union sweetheart deal struck with the GMB in 2004 (three years after waste and recycling services were outsourced to Veolia), on the basis that it met the criteria of collective bargaining.

The anti-democratic character of this decision was exposed by Unite's report that it represents 80 percent of the Lumley Street workforce. In March, 150 workers at the depot—including GMB and non-union members—signed a petition demanding Veolia recognise Unite.

Veolia has since launched legal proceedings against Unite for defamation, accusing the union of a "relentless and misguided campaign of intimidation and harassment." The Veolia workers voted to renew their strike in June, refusing to be intimidated.

Workers decamped to Unite after years of below-inflation deals agreed by the GMB, which repeatedly demobilised strike action. Pay at Veolia's Sheffield subsidiary has fallen by 22 percent in real terms over the past decade.

Unite easily presented itself as a militant alternative to the GMB's naked corporatism. But after nearly a year of struggle, what is the balance sheet?

The strike has remained isolated by the Unite leadership under Sharon Graham, refusing to mobilise united action among its one million-strong membership, including striking refuse workers in Birmingham. Instead, Unite diverted Lumley Street workers into the dead end of its "leverage" campaign, lobbying Veolia's headquarters, shareholders, and business partners after management withdrew from a recognition agreement in December.

No genuine step forward for workers' rights to representation has ever been won by seeking a sympathetic ear in the corporate boardroom, only in a fight against harassment and intimidation by employers.

Genuine mass action by workers, not performative solidarity

Wednesday's "mega-picket" will not break the deadlock. It mimics one organised on May 9 at Lifford Lane, one of the three council depots where around 400 Birmingham bin workers have been on all-out strike since March 11. This was utilised by the apologists of the union bureaucracy to shore up its authority behind an act of performative solidarity.

The *Socialist Worker* declared, "In Birmingham, the mega-picket put workers back on the front foot. After over 10 months of strikes, this is a crucial step forward for workers at Lumley Street."

As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported, "The stage-managed 'mega picket' provided an opportunity for union

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leaders to pose before the cameras with their hollow declarations of solidarity, while surrender terms are plotted behind closed doors at ACAS."

Birmingham workers launched their strike to prevent the abolition of the safety-critical role of Waste Recycling Collection Officer (WRCO) and to oppose pay cuts of up to £8,000. But in a June 30 press release, Unite speaks of WRCOs in the past tense and argues only for mitigation of the pay cuts.

Unite's press release described the strike as impacting "around 400 workers who are either *former* Waste Recycling Collection Officers or bin lorry drivers" and urged council leader John Cotton to stop blocking "every attempt by council officials who are in talks to put forward a deal that *mitigates* against the workers being financially ruined by the cuts."

The defence of the WRCO role is at the heart of joint strike action by loaders and drivers aimed at stopping the council's plan to cut bin crew sizes by 25 percent. Bin lorry drivers who struck in solidarity were told they too faced downgrading and a pay cut of up to £10,000. This is part of a broader attack on the entire Birmingham council workforce by the flagship Labour authority, aided by unelected commissioners to enforce £300 million in cuts.

Rather than uniting these struggles in coordinated action, Unite staged a lobby of Cotton at last week's Local Government Association (LGA) conference in Liverpool. This same Labour leader has slandered pickets as "violent" as part of a media witch-hunt cheered on by Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner and used to justify an unprecedented strikebreaking operation backed by the Starmer government.

The Unite leadership has meekly obeyed Birmingham Labour Council's High Court injunction against mass picketing. This is not due to fear of legal consequences; Unite fears that any genuine mobilisation would unleash a mass movement against the Starmer government, reviled for its austerity, its complicity in the Gaza genocide and criminalisation of civil disobedience. The Labour government treats strikes by essential workers resisting pay cuts and job losses as "unlawful," threatening them with Public Order laws carrying fines and jail time.

Rank-and-file committees

The unification of workers' struggles requires far more than coordinated action or token "mega-pickets." What is needed is the revival of the class struggle and a fight for socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party unconditionally supports the right of Veolia workers to choose which union represents them. But Unite has shown after nearly a year that it cannot wage the required struggle and is seeking to prevent at all costs a major confrontation with the Starmer government and the corporate elite.

While occasionally criticising Labour, Unite continues to bankroll this anti-working-class party. Graham essentially agrees that the working class must pay for decades of austerity and corporate tax giveaways. Her only goal is to facilitate a "debt restructuring" deal between the Starmer government and local councils.

Workers have entirely opposed interests not only to those of management and the employers, but to the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracies that act to defend capitalist profit and their own privileges by policing the class struggle.

In the event of Veolia workers winning recognition for Unite, their fight for decent pay and conditions will bring them into conflict with Unite's bureaucratic leadership.

The most recent example, at the end of last month, was the demobilisation of indefinite strike action by 400 Stagecoach bus drivers in Scotland, among the lowest paid in the UK, after a sellout deal. Coventry bin lorry drivers' determined strike in 2022 was isolated by Unite, allowing the Labour council's strikebreaking to succeed. An agreement hailed by Unite as a "victory" led to mass redundancies and tearing up of safety protocols, culminating just six months later in the death of a veteran bin worker.

To open a way forward, workers must build **rank-and-file committees**—democratic organs of class struggle—to establish direct oversight of their struggles and determine strategy.

Critical to victory is the ability of workers to appeal to and mobilise solidarity action by their brothers and sisters, not just other refuse workers, but council employees throughout the UK facing similar attacks, and Veolia workers in the UK and internationally. How else can a massive transnational utility company like Veolia, which operates in the water, waste and energy sectors on five continents with 215,000 employees, and which has the backing of national governments and state bodies, be defeated?

To discuss these fundamental questions, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* using the form below.

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