

Veolia recognition strike in Sheffield: Unite stages bogus “mega-picket”

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The “mega-picket” held Wednesday at Veolia’s Lumley Street depot in Sheffield, marking 11 months of strike action by refuse workers for recognition of Unite the union, confirmed warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS). Far from breaking the isolation of the dispute, the event was a stage-managed display of performative solidarity by the union bureaucracy.

Attendance was around 150. Outside of 30 Veolia strikers, Unite brought only a delegation of around 20 from the 400 striking Birmingham bin workers. Most of those present were trade union officials with banners, or affiliated with one or another pseudo-left group.

Veolia breached regulations by organising for refuse lorries to be parked up side streets ready to deploy, rather than from the depot, bypassing the picket to maximise operations.

The *Socialist Worker* promoted the event—modelled on the May 9 “mega-picket” in Birmingham—as putting “workers back on the front foot,” with another planned for Birmingham on July 25.

National unions including the University and College Union, National Education Union, Public and Commercial Services Union, several Trades Councils (Sheffield, Barnsley, Leeds, Liverpool), “We Demand Change” linked to Jeremy Corbyn, and the Socialist Party’s National Shop Stewards Network sponsored the “Mass Picket”. The leaflet declared, “The strike has reached a critical stage and needs our support.”

The low turnout exposed the hollowness of such declarations. The event was a choreographed exercise to shore up Unite’s leadership and the trade union apparatus. Sheffield and Birmingham refuse workers have shown real determination, and their action can galvanise broader working-class opposition. But this is something the bureaucracy dreads as it would mean direct confrontation with the Labour government and its locally controlled authorities.

In Sheffield, the Labour-led council, in alliance with transnational corporation Veolia, has denied workers

representation by the union of their choice—Unite—to protect its sweetheart company deal with the GMB. In Birmingham, the Labour council, backed by Starmer’s government, has waged an unprecedented strikebreaking operation against workers who are resisting job losses and pay cuts of £8,000–£10,000.

The WSWS campaign team covered the picket with the article, “Support striking Veolia bin workers in Sheffield: Build a rank-and-file committee!” It stated:

“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 to prevent a major confrontation with the Starmer government and the corporate elite.”

A Veolia striker explained why workers at Lumley Street had left the GMB:

“I didn’t feel I was getting the representation I needed. Over a period of time, people have chosen the union of their choice, which was Unite. We’ve got nothing against GMB members—they’re our friends and family.

“Everything’s gross misconduct (with management)—things that used to be minor warnings. It’s just a misuse of power. Most days on my round were 12 to 18 miles. My best day was 12. And if we didn’t finish, we faced delays, more traffic, and pressure in the debrief for ‘underperforming.’”

A Birmingham striker explained:

“I came up with my colleagues to show solidarity because our fight is their fight. Birmingham and Sheffield are working-class cities, with histories of struggle in the steel and mining industries. I just can’t believe what’s happening—a Labour government, Labour councils, imposing pay cuts. We don’t even know if there’ll be more negotiations. They’re trying to break us, but we’re staying strong. They’ve offered voluntary redundancies, and we’ve already lost 20 drivers off the picket lines. The other depots have lost quite a few too.”

Unite officials responded by instructing workers not to speak to the WSWS and to hand back its leaflet, claiming it was “anti-union.” This smear—used routinely by

bureaucrats—falsely equates pro-worker criticism with right-wing attacks, to shield the bureaucracy from rank-and-file scrutiny.

Unite National Officer Onay Kasab, a supporter of the Socialist Party, denounced the WSWs leaflet as “disgraceful”, without citing a single word that was not true. The leaflet directly quotes Unite’s own press release referring to Waste Recycling Collection Officers (WRCOs) in the past tense and urging Birmingham Labour council leader John Cotton to support a deal that merely *mitigated* the pay cuts. The seven-month strike was launched to defend the 150 safety-critical WRCO roles, oppose the reduction in crew sizes by 25 percent and slash wages by £8,000, all part of Labour’s £300 million cost-cutting offensive across the council workforce and services.

Behind the political theatre of solidarity, the Unite union apparatus is actively isolating these disputes to wear workers down and foist surrender terms on them. The claim that criticisms by WSWs jeopardise workers’ chance of winning a good deal was refuted later in the day when Cotton announced the Labour council was “walking away” from the talks and would begin the process of compulsory redundancies.

The Unite rally outside Sheffield Town Hall at midday was just as shambolic as the “mass picket” at Veolia, with no delegation of Birmingham strikers or speeches from any listed union sponsors. A petition supporting recognition was delivered to Sheffield Labour council, signed by 6,000 residents. While showing popular backing, it channels workers into futile appeals to a Labour-run authority that handed Veolia £11.7 million last year while facing a £20 million deficit.

After eleven months of determined strike action in Sheffield and seven in Birmingham, Unite under Sharon Graham has refused to mobilise Veolia or council workers alongside their colleagues—let alone its 1 million members. Instead, it has abided by the High Court injunctions used against both strikes.

Kasab delivered a speech about “solidarity,” never once mentioning this legal assault. He boasted of Unite that “since August 2021 we have been involved in nearly 1,500 disputes, winning over 80 percent of those, putting £500 million into members’ pockets.” These sound bites conceal that many deals failed to reverse years of wage decline or match inflation, thanks to Unite dividing strikes by transport, warehouse and dock workers into isolated disputes. The union did this while corralling workers behind an incoming Starmer government claiming it would offer reprieve from 14 years of Conservative rule, which is now organising strike breaking in Birmingham and pioneering repressive measures against workers resistance to the destruction of

their jobs and conditions.

What Unite has previously defined as a “win” should act as a warning. After failing to mobilise supportive action against strikebreaking by Coventry Labour council, the 2022 settlement ending the seven-month strike by 70 bin lorry drivers was hailed as a “victory.” Kasab endorsed the deal, which tied a 12.9 percent pay rise to strings like working 45 weekends a year and job cuts—38 within three months. Many staff were replaced by personnel from Tom White Waste, the arms-length but wholly owned subsidiary of the Labour council used in its strike breaking operation.

On the petition, Kasab said of Labour, “we don’t trust the bastards,” but Unite members’ dues still fund Starmer’s anti-working-class party. Kasab claimed Labour opposed Unite because it backed a wealth tax on the richest 1 percent. But Sharon Graham’s real focus has been to promote a “debt restructuring” plan with the Starmer government and local councils that would preserve austerity and leave Birmingham council workers and services footing the bill.

Genuine working-class solidarity means a mobilisation against austerity and attacks on workers’ rights by Starmer’s pro-business government, which is possible only in a rebellion *against* Labour’s partners in the union bureaucracy.

As the WSWs leaflet stated:

“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 mobilise solidarity action, not just from other refuse workers, but from council employees throughout the UK and Veolia workers internationally.”



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