

Unite forced to suspend Angela Rayner's membership by rising opposition to Starmer Labour government

Tony Robson
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Unite's decision to suspend Labour Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner from union membership was forced on it by mounting hostility to the Starmer government.

Rayner was suspended last Friday for her “totally and utterly abhorrent” behaviour and “bringing the union into disrepute” during the Birmingham bin dispute, with the same action taken against Birmingham council leader John Cotton and fellow Unite Birmingham councillors “for their roles in effectively firing and rehiring the workers, who are striking over pay cuts of up to £8,000.”

The decision was contained in an emergency motion at a Unite Policy Conference in Brighton, attended by 800 delegates representing every sector of workers in the union across the UK, and passed overwhelmingly. The lower-ranking officials understand the popular sentiment of Unite's members towards the Labour government and how the union's relations with the party are becoming untenable.

According to Unite, the emergency motion condemned “Birmingham council for its threat to effectively fire and rehire, on pain of redundancy, the Unite Birmingham bin workers.” The Labour government was also denounced for its “support to the council and the commissioners, originally appointed by the Tories and maintained by Labour.”

Rayner has not publicly responded, but a Labour source claimed she had already quit the union and “won't be pushed around,” branding the announcement a “silly stunt.”

When Rayner last paid dues is immaterial, as she and Cotton were both understood to be Unite members by workers in Birmingham and nationally. Unite officials concluded that they must make a public protest against Labour's strikebreaking operation against 400 bin

workers now in their seventh month of a struggle to defeat the destruction of their jobs and drastic pay cuts. Unite, with its 1.1 million members, is the second largest union in the UK and such sentiments will be replicated throughout the working class.

The suspension of Rayner and Cotton confirms the analysis of the *World Socialist Web Site* from the start of the Birmingham bin dispute: that the enemy in this fight is the Starmer government and its flagship council, meaning it must be pursued as a political struggle against both.

For seven months of strike action, all out since March 11, Birmingham bin workers—loaders and lorry drivers—have fought to oppose the abolition of the safety-critical role of some 150 loaders (Waste Reduction and Collection Officers), which would slash wages by up to a quarter and reduce crews by 25 percent.

Cotton declared last Wednesday that the Labour Council was ending further negotiations and, on Thursday, initiated the process of enforcing downgrading and pay cuts among 127 senior drivers under threat of redundancy, asserting that all talks had been exhausted.

Unite has not been able to place any offer before its members since a derisory “partial offer” in April was rejected by a 97 percent majority. That offer included a lump-sum bribe of up to £17,000 and an attempt to drive a wedge between loaders facing the immediate assault and drivers, now informed that they face a similar downgrade.

Unite officials agreed to put the deal forward at the behest of Rayner, who publicly intervened, stating the dispute had to end and the “improved offer” be accepted.

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham agreed to opening talks at the arbitration service ACAS from May 1 with the aim of de-escalating the dispute in a damage limitation exercise on behalf of Labour. For the past months, Unite HQ has conducted a PR campaign to get

Rayner and Cotton into negotiations, claiming they were blocking a potential deal. But the claim that Labour could be pressured has imploded: with Cotton declaring “we have reached the absolute limit of what we can offer.”

Graham now states, “The disgraceful actions of the government and a so-called Labour council is essentially fire and rehire and makes a joke of the Employment Relations Act promises.”

This is plain to every worker, but Graham is attempting to salvage credibility for her union and the “New Deal” between Labour and the entire trade union bureaucracy, which retains the brutal practice of fire and rehire as part of business-friendly legislation already rinsed of any meaningful measures to restore workers’ rights—even before it reaches the statute books.

The same can be said about the pledge to defang some of the anti-strike legislation introduced under the Conservatives. The Starmer government fully supported its Labour authority in second largest city Birmingham declaring a “major incident” on March 31 to empower itself with unprecedented strikebreaking measures. This included employing agency staff as a scab workforce and mobilising support from private contractors and neighbouring councils.

Police broke up picket lines and kettled workers behind barriers under the threat of fines and imprisonment under Section 14 of the Public Order Act. The later High Court injunction obtained in May limiting pickets to six and to designated zones was extended, with Unite agreeing to fully abide by the restrictions.

Graham’s latest comments confirm how hated the Starmer government has become, to the point where the Labour Party faces meltdown. Speaking to BBC Radio 4 on Saturday she stated, “Angela Rayner refuses to get involved, and she is directly aiding and abetting the fire and rehire of these bin workers, it is totally and utterly abhorrent.”

She added, “I have real difficulty in the way that Labour are making decisions, in terms of what they tried to do on winter fuel [allowance cuts for pensioners], what they tried to do to people with disabilities [welfare cuts], what they’re doing to workers”.

Most significantly, referring to the union’s affiliation to the Labour Party (Unite provided Labour £2 million in the year up to the general election, and has already handed over £400,000 this year) she added, “At this present moment in time, it is hard to justify it, if I’m being honest. Would that money be better spent on frontline services for my members?”

The leader of the UK’s second largest union has gone on record to state that, despite her best efforts, justifying partnership with this right-wing party of big business has become politically hazardous in the face of the mass hostility in the working class.

Like the announcement of a Jeremy Corbyn/Zarah Sultana-led party after years of prevarication, this signals the accelerating break-up of the Labour Party.

But neither forming a miniature Labour Party under Corbyn—advancing nothing but toothless moral appeals for a fairer society that fall of the deaf ears of the banks, corporations and the super-rich—or even Graham finally making good on threats of disaffiliation will provide workers with a means to take on the government.

Explosive class struggles are on the agenda and they must be fought to the end against the employers, the government and the state powers it wields. Defending the livelihoods and basic interests of workers today means taking up a fight against capitalism and for socialism.

Frontline workers are not responsible for the financial crisis of Birmingham council or anywhere else. It is not their jobs and pay which are unaffordable and must be sacrificed. Society cannot afford the continued funnelling of wealth to the super-rich by a Labour government that is gutting public services and slashing welfare and the National Health Service to fund rearmament, war and debt payments to global finance.

What is required immediately is the construction of rank-and-file committees, acting independently of the Unite leadership and its bureaucratic counterparts in every union, to mobilise solidarity action behind the Birmingham bin workers and all those struggling against Starmer’s pro-business government.



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