

Birmingham bin-strike “Mega-picket 2” used by union bureaucracy to plead with Labour’s strike breakers

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The second “mega picket,” staged on July 25 billed as a show of support for 400 striking Birmingham bin workers, was a travesty of genuine working-class solidarity.

It served only the interests of Unite and the broader trade union bureaucracy, which has isolated the strike for more than six months while refusing to lift a finger in defence of a militant section of workers opposing job losses and drastic pay cuts of £8,000, and who are facing a strikebreaking operation led by the Starmer government and co-ordinated by its flagship local authority under councillor John Cotton.

Far from mobilising workers against this vicious offensive, the event was another token gesture, providing left-talking union officials with political cover while they preach conciliation with Labour—both nationally and locally—as it enforces a repressive precedent to be used against the entire working class.

Birmingham bin workers began their action on January 6 and from March 11 have carried out more than 130 days of continuous strike action up until Friday, the day of “Mega-picket 2”. During this, the so-called “labour movement” has responded with only two days of performative solidarity—the first on May 19. These stunts are being passed off as serious mobilisations against the Labour government’s deepening assault.

The raft of draconian measures deployed against the 400 striking workers has continued to expand, turning the dispute into a test bed for suppressing militant opposition which the Starmer government faces on a far broader scale. This includes: spending £8 million on recruiting of agency workers and using private contractors as a strikebreaking force, the use of public order laws in March and a High Court injunction in May to criminalise and disperse pickets—enforced by a £1 million policing operation—and Cotton’s announcement more than a fortnight ago that the council was walking away from negotiations in order to implement a fire and rehire policy against striking workers.

“Mega-picket 2” was hyped by the entire pseudo-left,

embedded in the union bureaucracy. *Socialist Worker* claimed it could put the Birmingham bin strike “back on the front foot,” urging the “entire trade union movement” to get behind it. If successful, it wrote, the picket would “pile the pressure back onto the austerity-pushing Labour council.”

The Stalinist *Morning Star* declared, “Tomorrow’s mega picket in Birmingham, organised by Strike Map in support of Birmingham bin workers, shows the breadth of solidarity they have won across the trade union movement,” adding that it was “the gift of central government to resolve this dispute without cutting pay.”

What is described as the “trade union movement” is a Potemkin village of mainly pseudo-left groups, who assembled with union banners and their placards with only “hundreds” reported in attendance. Not a single act of industrial action was organised in support of the strike. It was used to showcase union general secretaries who paid lip service to “solidarity”.

Strike Map, the organisation entrusted by the union bureaucracy to stage these token events, declared:

“We are organising Mega Picket 2: Five Sites, One Day! Twenty-six organisations from across the trade union movement, including RMT, ASLEF, NEU, NASUWT, and the BMA, will be converging on Birmingham and Coventry.”

It boasted that not a “wheel turned” at the five depots on July 25, but the temporary disruption caused is far outweighed by fact that the event was used as a political damage exercise on behalf of the Starmer government and a local authority which continues to act with impunity.

Strike Map’s pre-event message begged: “The government has the power to step in and end this dispute,” adding, “our pleas are falling on deaf ears” and described Unite’s move to strip Labour Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner of her union membership as “symbolic.” This is the language of prostration.

Unite only moved to suspend Rayner and Cotton because

it had become impossible to maintain the fiction—pushed by General Secretary Sharon Graham—that they could act as honest brokers rather than key architects of the attack on Birmingham bin workers and enemies of the working class.

To prevent a genuine industrial and political struggle, the mega-picket was framed in appeals worse than useless to the Starmer government to “intervene”: not to the working class which could halt its attack on Birmingham bin workers.

Steve Wright, Fire Brigades Union general secretary, said: “We are clear both the prime minister and deputy prime minister need to intervene and help end this dispute. We continue to demand that the central government recognises its role in addressing the crisis in local government funding.”

Nothing could be more bankrupt than to present the Starmer government as bystanders. Their “intervention” has been to pile on the strikebreaking operation, which is how the underfunding of local councils is being “addressed”. There is no money for frontline services and workers’ pay and jobs. But a war chest has been provided for the organisation of an army of agency staff and a police operation in a bid to crush resistance.

The empty platitudes and pleas to the Starmer government were summed up by the headlined speaker Jeremy Corbyn, who confirmed the day before, after years of prevarication, that he was forming a new left party claiming it would stand for a “mass redistribution of wealth and power.” None of this was evidenced in his remarks.

Corbyn stated, “Birmingham is not isolated and Birmingham is not alone—the financial issues that affect Birmingham are actually there in almost every local authority in the country, particularly in the big urban cities.

“And those problems are that they have not enough money,” he said, before meekly adding, “The government is not spending enough money on local government.”

This was the basis for his vacuous call to “Get a deal now, settle this dispute now.”

Asked by the media after his speech what his message was to the Birmingham council leader Corbyn stated, “John, get a deal. Get a settlement, get the bin workers back to work.”

This olive branch to Starmer and his local henchman was a smokescreen for a further crackdown against the Birmingham strikers, with the announcement that the council is to take out contempt of court proceedings against pickets defying the High Court injunction. A Unite spokesperson cited by the BBC explaining how it had sought to “ensure that there has been compliance with the court order”.

The Birmingham bin strike can and must be won—but not through stunts, hollow appeals, or reliance on a union bureaucracy. What is needed is the formation of a rank-and-

file strike committee to take control of the struggle and break out of its isolation, to unify with council workers and other sections of the working class nationwide, to wage a collective fight against austerity and the frontal assault on workers’ rights by the Starmer government.

The declared bankruptcy of Birmingham City Council in September 2023—initiating £300 million in cuts overseen by Tory government-appointed and Labour-maintained commissioners—is the tip of a much broader crisis. A 2025 National Audit Office report warned that around 43 percent of English councils are at risk of effective bankruptcy. A Local Government Association survey found that one in four councils may require emergency financial support to avoid insolvency by 2026–27. Between 2010 and 2020, core funding from central government to councils was slashed by over 50 percent in real terms.

The Starmer government is totally committed to this austerity driven agenda as the only way it can redirect billions into war and rearmament. It has pledged to raise defence spending to 5 percent of GDP, carrying out the demands of the financial oligarchy to boost profits at the direct expense of workers’ lives and livelihoods.

The defence of Birmingham refuse workers is not only a vital act of solidarity against Labour’s strikebreaking operation. It is the essential preparation for a broader counter-offensive by the working class against austerity and the authoritarian measures now being unleashed to dismantle jobs, pay, and critical public services.



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