

Birmingham bin workers fight demands a mobilisation of the working class to defeat Starmer government

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Striking Birmingham bin workers and all those seeking genuine solidarity with their struggle must consider how to take forward the fight to defeat the Starmer government's brutal austerity agenda, enforced through its flagship local authority.

Calls for "Victory to the Birmingham bin workers" at the national demonstration organised by Unite in the city on Saturday mean nothing outside of formulating a strategy to make this a reality.

The determination of the 400 bin loaders and drivers at the city's three depots is beyond doubt. They have stood firm against plans to cut pay by up to £8,000, the elimination of the safety-critical Waste Recycling and Collection Officer role, and a quarter reduction in crew sizes. In April they rejected a lump-sum bribe to sell their jobs, and earlier this month voted for a second time to extend the strike until March 2026 with a 99.5 percent majority. As strikers have stated, "It is us today, you tomorrow," in a direct appeal to the working class.

Yet after more than six months of all-out action, their defiant stand remains isolated: one section of militant workers has faced an unprecedented strike-breaking operation by the Starmer government that goes beyond anything attempted by its Tory predecessors.

On March 31 the Labour authority, backed by Starmer, declared a "major incident." Police used Section 14 of the Public Order Act to disperse pickets, while military planners were brought in to coordinate a strike busting operation involving the hiring of agency staff as a replacement workforce and support services drafting in from neighbouring councils. The restrictions on pickets which are limited to designated zones remains in force through the indefinite High Court injunction granted in May.

The reality must be faced. The mobilisation against this

attack on tens of thousands of other council workers and of workers more generally has been prevented by Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, who presides over a union with one million members. And this has been reinforced by the collusion of the entire trade union bureaucracy.

"Mega-pickets" in May and July—backed by Strike Map and pseudo-left groups—have been ritual events for union officials to spout empty phrases of solidarity, justifying their continued partnership with the Starmer government and Birmingham council leader John Cotton by claiming they could be pressured to "do the right thing." The temporary closures of the yards on these occasions does not alter the political bankruptcy of this charade.

Unite's "Rally for the Brum Bin Workers" arranged for a Saturday means that there is not even a token picket involved. Marching from Unite HQ in Birmingham to the council chambers, a flyer states this is to "demand immediate negotiations to end the strike with no cuts to pay or a fair deal which workers can accept."

How can this be taken seriously? Cotton in July declared that the Labour council was walking away from further talks to impose downgrades and cuts on 127 senior drivers under threat of redundancy. In the same month the Labour government amended its Employment Rights Bill to allow councils such as Birmingham who have filed for bankruptcy to adopt the policy of fire and rehire against their workforces, paving the way for a much wider offensive.

Yet the recent Trades Union Congress conference maintained the fraud that the much-touted Bill "enshrining workers' rights" would be adopted in full. Graham was part of this political smokescreen. Speaking out of both sides of her mouth, she said that if a vote was held today Unite members would vote to disaffiliate from

Labour, before reassuring the *Guardian* that Starmer should be given another year.

The union bureaucracy will do nothing to disrupt its cosy relations with the Starmer government. Its demobilisation of the 2022-3 strike wave against the Tories has been extended to support for the most right-wing government in British post war history. The relationship between the trade unions with Labour is not determined by the protection of workers' rights but is the action of a wing of the same bureaucratic apparatus dedicated to policing the class struggle on behalf of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

This is exemplified in the £300 million cuts package being inflicted by the Labour authority and unelected commissioners against workers and public services in Birmingham, the second largest city in the UK.

While filing for bankruptcy in 2023 under Section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988, the Labour authority can fund a strike breaking operation against workers who stand up and resist the cuts. A *Birmingham Live* freedom of information (FOI) request revealed that by July the council had spent £6.5 million in six months on agency staff from Job and Talent and £1.3 million and in three months on contractor Tom White Waste, owned by Labour-run Coventry City Council. By May, policing costs were nearing £1 million.

But Unite cites these damning revelations only to dismiss them as policy mistakes, rather than evidence of a state-backed operation to smash resistance to austerity. Its overarching aim is to maintain the fiction that the Labour authority can be brought to the negotiating table, leaving its members hung out to dry.

The refusal to mobilise against the High Court injunctions or defy anti-strike laws on secondary action by Unite—or any other unions—is not primarily because of a fear of fines. It is because this legislation is a weapon employed by the union bureaucracy to clampdown on oppositional sentiment among millions of workers against the major corporations and the pro-business and warmongering Starmer government.

Workers are told to obey the law as fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and assembly are stripped from them—with hundreds arrested for peacefully speaking out against the government's complicity in the genocide in Gaza and the banning of Palestine Action—and the state is mobilised against militant action by workers such as that waged in Birmingham.

Birmingham's bin workers are not responsible for the financial crisis of the Labour run authority. And neither

are council workers up and down the country for the cash strapped councils where they face similar “job evaluations” to impose pay cuts and deskilling, as frontline services which millions depend on are bled dry.

After a decade of austerity, central government funding has been slashed by up to 60 percent with nearly half of councils in England facing bankruptcy, according to a report by the National Audit Office. The attack on Birmingham bin workers is to spearhead an austerity drive by the Starmer government that begins where the Tories left off.

The defence of Birmingham bin workers is the essential preparation for a counteroffensive against the savage cuts and the authoritarian methods used to slash jobs and pay and dismantle essential services throughout Britain.

The need for a strike committee to be established by Birmingham bin workers has never been more urgent to prevent their defiant stand from being worn down by the Unite apparatus, as the fire and rehire policy is implemented under direction of the Labour government.

This will enable the workers to take control of their struggle, break their isolation and unify with every section of workers being drawn into struggle against the Starmer government's assault on workers rights.

The building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace against the pro-government union apparatus can arm the fight against social inequality, exploitation and attack on democratic rights with a socialist programme against the tightening grip of corporate oligarchy and their war drive.



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