

Unite and unions “solidarity” with Birmingham bin workers: Cosplay to block a fightback against Starmer government

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22 September 2025

Saturday’s Unite the union national demonstration in support of 400 Birmingham bin workers was another hollow display of “solidarity” designed to maintain the isolation of the six-month all-out strike.

A single section of workers has confronted the Starmer government and its flagship Labour authority, which is imposing mass job losses and pay cuts of up to £8,000 as part of £300 million cuts city-wide.

Saturday’s protest in Birmingham underlined how, despite the defiance of bin loaders and drivers across the three depots against a massive strikebreaking operation and now fire-and-rehire, the Starmer government and John Cotton leader of the Labour authority, have acted with impunity.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team distributed the article “Birmingham bin workers fight demands a mobilisation of the working class to defeat Starmer government”, which stated:

“The reality must be faced. The mobilisation against this attack on tens of thousands of other council workers and workers more generally has been prevented by Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, who presides over a union with a million members. And this has been reinforced by the collusion of the entire trade union bureaucracy.”

This was underscored by a turnout only in the hundreds, including strikers and their families. It featured around half a dozen branch or regional union banners from Unite, a few trades councils, and Unison, mostly held by members pseudo-left groups who assembled with their placards. The cosplay of solidarity took a literal form with some participants dressed up as miners from the 1984–85 strike in donkey jackets and hard hats.

The *Socialist Party* hailed the event as “an opportunity to show the huge solidarity which exists in the trade union movement,” while *Socialist Worker* wrote of a “loud and defiant” protest, showing “strong support from the trade union movement.”

Together with the Strike Map website, both groups had

promoted earlier “mega-pickets” in May and July at council depots as a resounding success. These one-off events allowed the union bureaucracy to mouth empty platitudes of solidarity while refusing to mobilise any organised opposition against Labour’s strikebreaking claiming that Cotton and Starmer could be pressured to “do the right thing”.

Saturday’s protest consisted of a march from Unite’s HQ to the Council House, accompanied by appeals for “immediate negotiations”—two months after the council withdrew from talks to press ahead with cuts and downgrades under threat of redundancy.

Unite’s official position to end the strike with “no cuts to pay” or “a fair deal which workers can accept” in practice means any offer which can be presented as face-saving. The isolation of the struggle has already led to the deletion of the safety-critical role of Waste Recycle and Collection Officer (WRCO) of around 170 loaders which the strike was launched to oppose and drivers signing the downgrading of their roles on the advice of Unite.

The pseudo-left groups shield Graham from rank-and-file opposition. They have no concern over the consequences for the Birmingham workers of a sellout or the precedent it sets against the working class so long as they can act as cheerleaders for the union bureaucracy.

As this month’s Trades Union Congress (TUC) conference made clear, including Graham’s carefully calibrated criticisms of Labour, the union bureaucracy has Starmer’s back not Birmingham strikers or any other section of workers. The TUC maintained the fraud that Labour’s Employment Rights Bill would be “adopted in full,” when it is being ditched. An amendment was made in July enshrining fire-and-rehire by allowing councils declaring section 114 bankruptcy, like Birmingham, to use it against their workforces.

No leader of any other national union addressed Saturday’s demonstration, with Graham claiming to have

been placed on the “naughty step” over her public criticism of the Labour council and government.

Even as she acknowledged the pay cuts of up to a quarter of wages, the use of “Thatcher’s anti-strike laws” and the adoption of fire-and-rehire in the amended Employment Rights Bill, this was presented as a terrible misunderstanding with the jury still out on Labour’s pro-business and right-wing agenda.

“How can Labour allow this to happen on their watch?”, she asked. She concluded her speech with the customary fob off, calling on Labour MP’s and councillors to “show workers whose side you are on.”

As for her claim that Unite would not allow workers to “be starved back to work”, this is what the union apparatus is trying to orchestrate through its isolation of the strike.

Graham stated that any fines levelled against the picketing through the High Court injunction by the Labour council would come out of its political levy. But Unite members will want to know why a far bigger slice of their dues is being used to fund a strike breaking Labour Party while nothing is done to mobilise those lined up for fire-and-rehire—listed by Graham as “the nurse, the school support staff, firefighter, the civil servant”.

The WSWS spoke to Birmingham bin workers about the need to take control of their struggle, break the isolation and unify with other workers being drawn into struggle against the Starmer government.

A bin lorry driver with more than 30 years in council refuse explained, “They said they weren’t coming for the drivers, which they did in the end. They dropped the Grade 3’s to a Grade 2 for loaders, and the Grade 4’s who are the drivers to a Grade 3.

“So now there is no safety on the back of the lorry. They have employed people to go into an office and watch a camera, which is on the back of the wagon and they have said that this is now going to be the principal safety monitor. If there is an accident on the back, there is no one to deal with it on the ground.

“Our safety critical officers have been on several courses including first aid, that has been taken away. Someone could be 15 miles away looking at a camera and if something happens on the back, there is no first-hand support. It’s a dark situation.

“The drivers were offered to go down to grade 3. The union told us to accept that to save our jobs and avoid compulsory redundancies. Now some people have had letters from the council that their grade 3 position hasn’t been successful, and they are in line for compulsory redundancy. This is blackmail.

“I think they will say unless you return to work by a certain date your jobs are gone. They tell us your job

doesn’t exist, but they have agency workers doing our job. This is breaking laws.

“The older workers over 55 took voluntary redundancies. There were about 60 of them and then there was a new wave of voluntary redundancies coming through and I think another 13 took that.

“If we don’t win this they will start on other workers in other councils. They have already started the same thing in Lichfield. Workers’ wages will be slashed. The Labour Party is not for the workers, they don’t care about the workers no more. People are turning away from them in droves.

“I think the majority of working people are supporting us. In my opinion the union should take away their affiliation to the Labour Party. It makes no sense to support Labour who are attacking us.

“I believe there should be a national strike across all unions, Unison hasn’t supported us in any shape or form. We need a general strike; it’s the only way to stop this government. We are the union, and we should have our say, on what should be done.

“The bin men collectively have been speaking to each other. If we are not happy, we are going to turn it around. We are not going to leave it to the union to decide.”

A bin loader of twenty years explained that he had received notice from the council that his WRCO role had been downgraded to a Grade 2. “We are fighting to keep our jobs, keep ourselves safe and the community safe. Taking away thousands of pounds from us is not on.

“We have been out for six months and nothing has changed much and we must make sure we win this. The council has got rid of the safety critical role on the lorries. They have got agency workers doing our jobs, but they tell us there are no jobs and we have to take redundancy.

“We have to make this strike bigger and get support from other unions and organise strikes. What they are doing here is happening to everyone.

“Electing a Labour government has not been good for us. The Labour council and Labour government are the ones making cuts, organising scabs and attacking our pickets. They are not for the working class. They are not listening to us, and they won’t negotiate.

“We will not return under these conditions; we will not surrender. We have to keep fighting and win more support.”



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