

# Labour council ramps up attacks on Birmingham bin workers

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Birmingham's Labour Party-run city council is doubling down on vicious methods aimed at crushing the city's bin workers' strike that began in January. The 400 refuse collection workers launched all-out indefinite action on March 11.

Bin loaders and drivers across the city's three depots have mounted determined resistance to the downgrading of their jobs, with annual pay cuts of up to £8,000, abolition of the safety-critical Waste Reduction and Collection Officer (WRCO) role, axing 150 posts and reducing crew sizes by a quarter.

In September, workers renewed their strike with a 99.5 percent mandate, extending it until March 2026—a show of defiance that has deepened the council's resolve to break them.

Over the past week, the Labour authority led by John Cotton has launched a battery of attacks on strikers. It has hauled Unite the union before the High Court over alleged breaches of picketing restrictions. Agency staff recruited to replace strikers have been threatened with blacklisting if they walk out and join the action, while strikers have been put on notice with the commencement of compulsory redundancies.

The Birmingham strike is a test bed for the Starmer government's austerity agenda against the entire working class. The declaration of a "major incident" by its flagship council on March 31 was used to justify an unprecedented strike-breaking operation: military planners were drafted in to coordinate mass recruitment of agency staff from neighbouring councils and private contractors, and police were deployed with powers under Section 14 of the Public Order Act to threaten pickets with fines and imprisonment.

But Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has refused to mobilise the union's million-plus members in defence of the embattled workers, isolating this pivotal strike and thereby emboldening ever more draconian attacks.

Birmingham council took Unite to the High Court in hearings from October 13, accusing it of breaching an injunction obtained in May against strike activity, and

demanding financial penalties.

Strikers were accused of slow-walking in front of waste trucks hindering the scabbing operation. Bruce Carr KC, representing the council, described a "pattern of disobedience" with which the authority had "lost patience." Treating "disobedience" as unlawful exposes the aim of this legal action—to set a precedent outlawing any effective picketing and criminalising workers defending their livelihoods.

Unite's response was capitulation: its KC, Oliver Segal, asked the court to recognise members' "strength of feeling" but apologised "unreservedly" for "unlawful conduct." Unite prostrates itself before an injunction aimed at intimidating strikers, while the Labour council shows utter contempt for the law when it comes to workers' rights—violations the union itself has exposed.

A Unite press release on October 14 revealed that the Labour council, in collaboration with labour-hire firm Job & Talent, is illegally threatening agency workers with blacklisting if they join the strike.

A video obtained from inside the Atlas depot shows Job & Talent manager Mark Asson telling agency staff that council officials Chris Smiles and Rob Edmondson had confirmed that anyone joining the picket would be barred from permanent employment: "I've spoken to Chris. I've spoken to Rob Edmondson... the council are not going to employ anybody they don't want to employ. So those people that do decide to join the picket line, then the council have confirmed to us they are not going to get a permanent job."

But in Graham's hands this exposure became another empty appeal for "accountability," summed up by the bankrupt call for Starmer's government to intervene—though it is directing the assault through its local henchman Cotton. "Ministers must act now to stop this appalling behaviour and bring this dispute to an end with a fair deal for the bin workers. The strikes will not end until it does."

To talk of a "fair settlement" with the Cotton-led authority is to hand workers over to their enemies. Since walking away from negotiations in July, the council began the brutal

practice of fire and rehire to impose downgrades and cuts on 127 senior drivers under threat of redundancy. This policy was endorsed at the highest level, with a Starmer government amendment to the Employment Rights Bill in July explicitly permitting fire and rehire by Section 114 bankrupt councils such as Birmingham. The council has already deleted the WRCO role.

On October 16, the BBC reported the council had “begun the process of compulsory redundancies for a number of workers,” stating that Unite had declined a request for comment. A wall of secrecy has been built by Unite around these methods being used against its members. A veteran bin lorry driver told the *World Socialist Web Site* a month ago: “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.”

The WWSW interview took place during Unite’s “Rally for the Brum Bin Workers” in Birmingham, billed as a national show of solidarity but attended by only a few hundred—mostly officials and pseudo-left groups acting as cheerleaders for Graham and the trade union bureaucracy. She used the rally to again call on Labour MPs and councillors to “show workers whose side you are on.” Repeating this after seven months of attacks shows Unite’s priority is defending the Labour government, not fighting it—aimed at wearing down and isolating resistance in Birmingham amid mass working-class hostility to Starmer’s pro-Thatcherite warmongers.

The council has spent £14 million since January—£50,000 a day—in its strike-breaking operation. Direct costs, including extra street cleaning, extended tip hours, and waste operations, total £9.6 million, with £4.4 million lost from refunds on suspended garden waste services.

Birmingham Labour council’s Section 114 “bankruptcy” in September 2023 was deliberately engineered through inflated estimates of a settlement in a protracted legal claim for equal pay by female workers at the council – including teaching assistants, carers and caterers. The cost of this claim is now an estimated £250 million, a third of the £650-£750 million cited originally by the council. The GMB and Unison unions representing the 6,000 claimants have been sworn to secrecy with the council over the terms finalised in a framework agreement last week after an agreement in principle last December.

*Birmingham Live* cited internal sources that “the figure is in the region of £250m.” The council has blocked Freedom of Information requests aimed at confirming the settlement figure.

The Section 114 declaration of bankruptcy was used by the Conservative government to send in unelected commissioners, enforcing £300 million in cuts to vital services and council jobs. Around 400 posts have already gone, while council tax has risen by 21 percent over two years.

GMB and Unison officials have praised Cotton’s Labour authority for delivering justice, fully aware the settlement has been cynically exploited not to level up pay and conditions but to spearhead the downgrading of jobs throughout the council, starting with the bin workers and spreading across the entire workforce.

Unite’s response to these exposures is a political cop-out. Graham’s press release blamed “mismanagement” and “incompetence,” diverting attention from the real conclusion: Starmer’s government has not only maintained the Tory austerity regime but weaponised it against the Birmingham bin workers.

The Birmingham bin workers’ fight is in the eleventh hour. Its success depends on a mass mobilisation of the working class against Starmer’s authoritarian methods being used to spearhead austerity. Pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party have abetted Unite’s isolation of the dispute. Their promotion of token “mega-pickets” in May and July were used by union officials to spout empty words of “solidarity” while justifying their continued partnership with Labour based on the claim they can be pressured to “do the right thing.”

A new path of struggle must be opened. The Birmingham bin strike can and must be won—but not through stunts, hollow appeals, or reliance on the union bureaucracy. A rank-and-file strike committee must be formed to take control of the dispute and break its isolation, issuing an appeal to council workers nationwide for a collective fight against austerity and the frontal assault on workers’ rights by the Starmer government.

The Starmer government is redirecting billions to war and rearmament. It has pledged to raise defence spending to 5 percent of GDP and to boost corporate profits at the direct expense of workers’ livelihoods. The defence of Birmingham refuse workers is essential preparation for a broader counter-offensive by the working class challenging the Starmer government’s agenda of austerity, authoritarianism and war.



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