

Agency workers join Birmingham bin workers dispute as Unite appeals to strike breaking Labour council and Starmer government

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Striking Birmingham bin workers—now in their eleventh month fighting job destruction and vicious pay cuts by Labour-run Birmingham City Council (BCC)—have been joined for the first time by agency workers previously used as part of the strike-breaking operation.

Around 400 Unite members began action in January, escalating to an all-out strike from March 11 against abolishing the safety-critical Waste Reduction and Collection Officer (WRCO) role of senior loaders to axe 150 jobs and cut wages by up to £8,000 a year. Downgrading and pay cuts were extended to drivers, who walked out with their loader colleagues from day one.

On Monday, agency workers employed through Job & Talent—used to supply the council’s strikebreaking workforce—began indefinite strike action after voting to do so two weeks ago in a ballot organised by Unite. Around 40 agency workers joined the dispute after overwhelmingly voting to walk out against bullying, harassment and blacklisting threats. BCC suspended refuse collections city-wide for the day, stating they would resume on Tuesday.

Agency worker Luke Graham told the BBC, “I think all the agency lads now have had enough and they just want to come out and stand for what’s right.”

Their defiance under threats of dismissal raises a fundamental question: why has Unite allowed its agency members to be deployed against their fellow workers while they too have been subjected to a brutal workplace regime by the Labour council and its contractor? Now agency workers have taken a courageous stand, Unite is utilising this as a manoeuvre—proclaiming an “escalation” only to revive bankrupt appeals to Labour council leader John Cotton to “return to talks.”

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has already shifted the dispute away from the defence of safety-critical roles and opposing massive pay cuts toward securing a one-off lump-sum

payment. She has referenced an undisclosed “ballpark deal” initially discussed in May, but any such deal would not compensate for the permanent loss of earnings and the reduction of crew sizes by a quarter.

The Labour council—backed to the hilt by the Starmer government—has responded to the clamour for a negotiated sellout by doubling down on their attacks seen as a test bed for deepening austerity against local government services and workers nationally.

The militant struggle waged by Birmingham bin workers could act as a catalyst for a wider mobilisation of hundreds of thousands facing the same fate. To prevent this is Unite’s main aim. BCC is imposing £300 million in cuts to frontline services under the direction of Whitehall-installed commissioners—first imposed under the Conservative government in September 2023 and retained under Starmer.

Graham’s pose of “outrage” against Labour provides cover for her refusal to mobilise Unite’s one-million members and blocks the solidarity that would be galvanised in the working class were the union to call action against Starmer’s austerity agenda.

Responding to the strike by agency union members, Graham stated, “Instead of wasting millions more of council taxpayers’ money fighting a dispute it could settle justly for a fraction of the cost, the council needs to return to talks with Unite and put forward a fair deal for all bin workers.”

No “fair deal” is on the table and Graham’s pleas conceal the reality that BCC’s agenda can only be enforced through brutal suppression—hence the war chest provided for strikebreaking and repressive policing with costs running at around £67,000 per day and the overall bill at £17 million.

In July, Unite suspended Labour’s then Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner and BCC leader Cotton from membership “for their roles in effectively firing and rehiring the workers, who are striking over pay cuts of up to £8,000.” The decision taken by 800 delegates at the Unite Policy

Conference bowed to popular sentiment that this was a fight against the Starmer government. But ever since it has been treated as a dead letter.

Rayner's removal in a cabinet reshuffle by Starmer in September has been used to speed up the gutting of Labour's already withered Employment Rights Bill (ERB), touted by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) as "the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation." Last Thursday its flagship "Day One rights" protection against unfair dismissal, which will now only come into effect after six months. This was agreed by business and trade union leaders behind closed doors and rubber stamped by the TUC. Graham was presented in the media as one of the few dissenting voices.

A key part of the ERB, ending fire and rehire, was amended in April to allow its use in cases where councils have declared Section 114 insolvency—such as the Labour council in Birmingham. This has been put to effect by Cotton. The position of WRCO's has been deleted and, by Unite's own admission, the Labour council took "the decision to brutally fire and rehire its HGV drivers and forced them onto lower pay rates."

The claim by Unite officials that the dispute can continue until next May not only highlights their continued isolation of Birmingham bin workers but allows the Labour council to chip away at resistance through its intimidation tactics. Anti-strike laws preventing secondary action ill not be challenged by Unite because the union bureaucracy is terrified of unleashing a broader mobilisation of the working class against the detested Starmer government.

Monday's rally at the Smithfield depot in Birmingham was attended by around 200 strikers buoyed by agency workers now joining their ranks. But they were faced with the same empty speechifying. Graham did not attend. Instead, Zarah Sultana, Coventry South MP and leading figure within the newly formed Your Party, was given centre stage.

Sultana has pitched to leftward sentiments with declarations that "politics does not belong to the billionaires" and "We're not begging for crumbs off the table. We are coming for the lot." But her remarks to the rally avoided explaining how such a perspective could be put into practice.

She stated: "I am here as a proud member of Unite the Union. I am here as the MP for Coventry South, bringing solidarity from Coventry. I was proud to stand on the picket line with Coventry workers when they were on strike and I am proud to be with you this morning."

The statement covers up for her role when still a Labour MP during the seven-month Coventry bin dispute in 2022, when the Labour council organised a strikebreaking operation via its arms-length company Tom White Waste—now directly involved in the scabbing operation in Birmingham. This was conducted with the full support of Starmer—while Labour was in opposition.

Sultana's public statements during the struggle of Coventry

bin workers were confined to appeals for the Labour council to work together with Unite negotiators to end the dispute—not appeals for a broader mobilisation of workers to halt the strike breaking operation.

This ended with the Unite agreed sellout deal in July 2022—including mass job cuts, overturning terms and conditions and enforcing unsafe work practices. The fraud that Unite's agreement in Coventry was a victory has been used to disarm workers in Birmingham confronted with similar isolation tactics.

Sultana's emphasis on being a Unite member was to solidarise herself with the union bureaucracy, not the embattled rank-and-file workers. She made no demand to end to the isolation of the 11-month fight, or any criticism of the Graham leadership. No call was made to take the fight to the Starmer government.

This underscores the central issue posed by the *World Socialist Web Site*:

"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."



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