Birmingham City’s Labour Council issues compulsory redundancies to striking bin workers

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Labour-run Birmingham City Council (BCC) has issued its first compulsory redundancy notices to striking bin workers.

The dispute, now in its 12th month, is at a critical juncture. Its prolonged isolation and subordination to Unite’s bankrupt strategy of appealing to the Labour council to be “reasonable” now threatens total defeat.

On Monday, ITVX reported that George Wilson, a striker and a bin lorry driver since 2015, is the first driver to be made compulsorily redundant for refusing to accept a downgrade of wages and conditions, including a pay cut of around £8,000. He was one of three refuse workers made compulsorily redundant, while around 80 others are thought to have accepted voluntary redundancy since the dispute began in January 2024.

Wilson, seven years from retirement, told the broadcaster: “They said the jobs would be available for us to move over, but that was not true. There were 12 jobs for 130 drivers, and eight of those were already taken.”

Four hundred bin loaders and drivers across the city’s three depots have mounted determined resistance, with strike action starting in January turning to all out action on March 11 against the downgrading of their jobs, involving pay cuts, the abolition of the loader’s safety-critical Waste Reduction and Collection Officer (WRCO) role—axing 150 posts—and crew sizes reduced by a quarter.

They have faced a coordinated strike-breaking operation led by the Labour council and directed by the Starmer Labour government. The council has chipped away at resistance, exploiting Unite’s isolation of the dispute and its bankrupt moral appeals to those prosecuting the attacks.

Twelve months in, the WRCO role has been abolished, loaders downgraded from Grade 3 to 2, and drivers from Grade 4 to 3. The use of scab labour and fire-and-rehire is being entrenched, with compulsory redundancies issued to those refusing to sign.

Unite’s leaders facilitate Labour’s attacks

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) warned from the outset that the Birmingham strike was a test case for the imposition of Starmer ’s austerity agenda against the working class.

The declaration of a “major incident” by the Labour council on March 31 was used to justify an unprecedented operation involving military planners, agency labour, support from outside councils—including Labour-run Coventry’s arms-length company Tom White Waste Ltd—and police deployment under Section 14 of the Public Order Act to disperse pickets under threat of fines and imprisonment.

Council leader John Cotton’s administration has escalated its offensive, dragging Unite before the High Court over alleged picketing breaches, using its contractor to threaten agency staff with blacklisting if they join the strike, and now initiating compulsory redundancies.

On December 1, agency workers previously used to break the strike joined the action for the first time. Around 40 Job & Talent agency workers began indefinite strike action after a ballot organised by Unite, protesting bullying, harassment and blacklisting threats.

Unite reports that BCC has responded by recruiting new agency labour. Online adverts seen by *Birmingham Live* include roles for an “HGV Class 2 refuse driver” via Smarter Solutions, which the council initially denied. Unite claims new agency workers have already been

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drafted in at the Smithfield depot.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said, “Instead of trying to break a strike, the council should stop disgracing itself and get back to talks to find a fair resolution for the bin workers.”

The council, backed by the Labour government, has acted precisely as Unite’s leadership has allowed it to by refusing to mobilise its one million members in solidarity with Birmingham strikers—instead choosing to preserve the union’s partnership with a discredited austerity government. Graham’s criticisms of Labour are vapid soundbites aimed at keeping a lid on any political struggle against the Starmer government with calls to Labour MPs and councillors to “show workers whose side you are on.”

Unite has diverted the struggle away from workers’ red lines—defending safety-critical roles and opposing deep pay cuts—towards securing a one-off lump-sum payment. Workers were urged to sign new contracts claiming this would allow the strike to be extended. Instead, it has cleared the way for compulsory redundancies, with loaders next in line.

In July, Cotton underscored the council’s intransigence, stating talks had “reached the absolute limit”.

Bins chief Councillor Majid Mahmood made clear how the union’s strategy has enabled the council to act with impunity: “Most of the former driver team leaders have accepted their roles as drivers. There were three compulsory redundancies issued. Some have taken voluntary redundancies; some changed their role. So, everyone has accepted a new role or taken other action. I’m struggling to understand why they [Unite members] are still out on strike.”

Rank-and-file unity not bureaucratic performative solidarity

Unite has not commented on the compulsory redundancies, but its backers in the pseudo-left organisations have announced yet another “mega picket” for January 30!

The theatre of mega pickets has been supported by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana’s Your Party. The claim that up to 30 organisations and trade unions will be mobilised to support the strikers is a fallacy. Only token officials and representatives of the unions will make an appearance, without a single workplace shut down in solidarity action.

“Mega-pickets” in May and July promoted by the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party were used by 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 one-day closures of the yards had no lasting impact.

The attack on Birmingham bin workers is only the beginning. The Labour authority’s Section 114 “bankruptcy” in September 2023 was engineered through inflating estimates of the cost of settling a protracted legal claim for equal pay by predominantly female workers at the council. This was settled this month for around £250 million, a third of the £650-£750 million originally cited.

Bankruptcy was used by the then Conservative government to impose unelected commissioners, maintained under Starmer, to push through £300 million cuts on vital services and council jobs.

The officials of the GMB and Unison who brought the legal claim on equal pay have praised the Cotton authority for delivering justice, knowing this has been cynically exploited not to “level up” pay and conditions but to justify the downgrading of jobs throughout the council, starting with the bin workers.

As the WSWS stated: “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.”

It is vital that workers now act in genuine solidarity with the Birmingham strikers. The path to waging any fight against the diktats of big business, imposed through the authoritarian methods of the Starmer government, lies through breaking the grip of its partners in the trade union bureaucracy.

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