

Birmingham bin strike: Rank-and-file workers must decide a new strategy to end their isolation

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For more than a year, Birmingham bin workers have waged a determined battle against the Labour-controlled authority headed by Councillor John Cotton fighting the imposition of brutal pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year, enforced downgrading and the elimination of safety-critical jobs.

Cotton leads the largest local authority in Europe, which is slashing £300 million from services over two years under a regime of unelected commissioners imposed by the Conservatives in September 2023, and maintained under the Keir Starmer's Labour government.

Nearly 400 drivers and loaders at three yards across the city, members of Unite, began strike action on January 6, 2025. This was escalated to indefinite action from March 11. The strike initially opposed the deletion of 150 Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) safety critical roles among loaders, but drivers who have participated from day one in solidarity, have faced a similar downgrading of their roles.

Labour's flagship authority responded by arming itself with extraordinary strike-breaking powers. On March 31, it declared a "major incident", seeking to criminalise the strike, drafting in agency labour and enlisting support from neighbouring authorities and private contractors—all co-ordinated by military planners. Starmer pledged, "We'll put in whatever additional support is needed."

As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), Birmingham bin workers appealed for immediate solidarity action, warning they were being used as a test case for attacks on every worker.

In April, the WSWS wrote that Birmingham had ceased to be a local dispute "the moment Starmer took leadership of the strike-breaking operation." We explained Starmer's intention to establish a precedent and indicted Unite's leadership, under General Secretary Sharon Graham, for refusing to mobilise its one-million-strong membership against the anti-worker attack in the UK's second-largest city:

To prevent their strike being crushed, refuse workers must fight to mobilise solidarity action by all sections of the working class in Birmingham and nationally to defeat the conspiracy of the commissioners, local Labourites and

the Starmer government. A rank-and-file leadership, operating independently of the union bureaucracy, must be formed to democratically discuss a new strategy, beginning with reaching out to all other council workers now under attack.

Instead of being turned into the spearhead of a working-class counteroffensive, the stand taken by Birmingham bin workers has been led to the edge of defeat. An honest and democratic discussion of the lessons of the struggle so far is needed to prepare a new course.

How has Unite led the dispute?

The Birmingham strikers have faced every form of intimidation: court injunctions against picketing, the enforcement of inferior contracts, and threats of sackings. In December the Labour authority made three compulsory redundancies against drivers who refused a downgrade and pay cut of up to £8,000 after around 80 redundancies had been conducted on a "voluntary" basis.

Unite's leadership under Graham and National Lead Officer Onay Kasab must account for their "leverage" strategy which has brought the dispute to this point. For more than half a year they have insisted, contrary to all evidence, that Labour, locally and nationally, can be shamed back to the negotiating table after the council walked away from further talks in July.

PR stunts organised on this basis have been window dressing on Graham's efforts to settle the dispute on the council's terms with a "ballpark deal" floated at May arbitration talks and later withdrawn: a lump sum payment reportedly of between £14,000 to £20,000 per worker. This trades the scrapping of the WRCO role and downgrading of drivers for a miserly sum which does not even compensate for lost earnings.

Unite officials have been central to enforcing this. The council has bragged that all former WRCOs remaining in council employment had been "successfully redeployed" and that the "majority of downgraded drivers" had accepted their new roles.

Unite's January 13 response—that workers "only signed agreements under duress because the council would have fired them"—amounts to an admission that this was done under union instruction.

The strikebreaking operation and use of fire and rehire forced Graham to make some criticisms of Labour. But this has always been coupled with vapid calls for the party to "show workers whose side you're on". Workers already know they're in the enemy camp.

The council has ploughed £33.4 million into breaking the strike. Unite has stated this is an undercount. However, rather than expose the class logic of a council which has declared bankruptcy finding millions to crush workers, it states, "resolving the dispute fairly would cost a fraction of the cost".

To appeal to the council on its own austerity-driven terms is appeasement not opposition. The union bureaucracy has long since abandoned any of the militant traditions which enabled workers to defeat co-ordinated attacks by employers and the state in the past. In fact, it refuses to challenge the anti-strike laws which underpin the High Court injunctions levelled against workers in Birmingham, maintaining cosy relations with the employers across the country which see profits put first, not worker's rights and livelihoods.

It is the same story with the equal pay scandal. Unite correctly note how the council's claim that downgrading bin workers is required for "equality" across its employees is a ruse to justify levelling down. But they leave unsaid the fact that the Labour authority cynically used an equal pay claim brought by predominantly female council employees and settled last December to justify sweeping cuts.

The council wildly exaggerated the expected payout to £650-£750 million (the real figure was £250 million), then declared a Section 114 bankruptcy, bringing in the unelected commissioners and cuts of £300 million.

Lessons from Coventry

Strikers can learn from the experiences of similar battles, hidden or distorted by Unite's leaders. Most importantly, the seven-month 2022 strike by Coventry bin lorry drivers against another Labour council that ran a strikebreaking operation—through its wholly owned subsidiary Tom White Waste, now used to scab in Birmingham.

Graham and Kasab continued to portray the Coventry settlement as one of many Unite pay "victories." Marketed as a 12.9 percent pay deal, it included sweeping concessions: overturning terms and conditions and driving through mass redundancies and the adoption of unsafe work practices. Six months later, loader David Carpenter was entangled and crushed in the back of a bin wagon.

Last June, the WSWs published an interview with a former union safety steward at the Coventry yard, one of three local reps who refused to sign the imposed contract, which Unite enforced without a ballot of its loader (collector) members. The union

apparatus blocked loaders from joining drivers in a joint struggle after they voted for strike action at a mass meeting.

Written to warn Birmingham workers against a similar sellout, the interview has sparked widespread discussion despite efforts by Unite officials to suppress it.

Coventry shows that Labour's strikebreaking methods were already battle-tested before being deployed on a far larger scale. It warns of what happens when strikes are isolated and workers not in control of the dispute.

Birmingham workers must discuss and decide a way forward

Birmingham bin strikers have won the respect of workers across the country. They have taken a heroic stand. But they cannot win on their own and so cannot let Unite's leadership continue to suffocate their action.

A collective, free and open discussion must be held among all affected workers and decisions taken on the next steps in the struggle. It is for the rank and file to decide their red lines and how to enforce them against the employers.

As a first step, links must be established with other council workers across the city and refuse workers and Unite members across the country. It is here that the strength to win the dispute can be found, in the wider working class with their own long list of grievances against the government and their employers—a force far greater than Cotton, the commissioners and Starmer.

This is the real process of building solidarity, versus the pantomime of the third "mega-picket" organised for Friday. Previous events in May and July last year were a platform for union officials to spout empty phrases of support, while continuing to promote a strategy of pressuring Starmer and Cotton to "do the right thing."

The temporary one-day closures of the yards had no lasting impact. The main impact of this "performative solidarity" was to boost the Unite leaders sabotaging the struggle and serve as a substitute for the broader industrial and political offensive which must be waged in the working class.

That offensive requires new rank-and-file leadership and organisation: democratic committees—reaching across local, sectional and national boundaries—of workers not content to let the union leaders have their way and be abandoned to strikebreaking operations and attacks on their livelihoods. We call on those who want to be a part of this fightback to contact us today.



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