

Birmingham bin workers defiant on the picket line

“It’s a rogue council, and it’s a rogue government. They’re hiding behind the equal pay issue”

Our reporters

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Striking Birmingham bin workers spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) on Friday as they picketed at Perry Barr and Smithfield, two of three council yards hit by the action, alongside the Atlas site in Tyseley. Reporters distributed the article “Birmingham bin strike: Rank-and-file workers must decide a new strategy to end their isolation.”

More than a year after beginning their struggle, with walkouts from January and indefinite strike action from March 11, workers remain determined to defeat the Labour council’s attack on pay, jobs, and safety. The council is driving through pay cuts of up to £8,000 and deleting the safety-critical post of loaders—the Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO)—with a similar downgrade of drivers.

Workers said they had not waged a year-long fight to accept a lump-sum payoff that fails to compensate for their major loss of earnings, legitimizes downgraded roles, and paves the way for unsafe working conditions. They emphasized that the dispute has become a confrontation not only with the council but with Keir Starmer’s Labour government, which has intervened to back its flagship authority and establish a precedent against workers nationally.

Strikers remained kettled behind steel barriers away from the yard gates. This is the result of a standing High Court injunction to remove pickets from peacefully slowing down waste trucks and making appeals to the replacement agency workforce brought in by the Labour authority to break the strike.

Among the concerns expressed was the isolation of the strike and attempts by Unite to end the dispute on terms that were not the same as workers’ red lines.

This was a world away from the themes of the stage-managed third “Mega-picket,” bringing together an assortment of union leaders—alongside Labourite, Green, and

Your Party representatives—who have not lifted a finger to stop the strike-breaking operations to mouth phrases of “solidarity”.

They touted a supposedly fair settlement to end the dispute, based on Unite general secretary Sharon Graham’s acceptance of a “ballpark deal” of just £14,000 to £20,000 per worker—first put forward by the council in July but then withdrawn as it enforced downgraded pay and terms on loaders and drivers, under threat of redundancy in a fire-and-rehire operation.

Perry Barr

Steve, a loader employed as an agency worker, spoke about how conditions had been driven down inside the yard by the strike-breaking operations.

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 organized by Unite, protesting bullying, harassment, and blacklisting threats.

“Basically, we are losing eight grand a year. So, if we did go back as agency staff members, we’d be losing money as well.

“They didn’t teach us proper safety. My truck had a fire twice, but we weren’t really told how to deal with fires on the trucks. They just throw you in the deep end and leave you there.

“There are only agency staff working in the depots right now. Because there are no full-timers in there, they can treat the agency workers however they want, making them do extra work.

“When the Labour council declared a major incident and used the courts, and then Starmer got involved, it only made it worse. The Labour council just doesn’t give a damn about us.”

Jacko, a loader of long standing, explained, “Before the strike, I worked here about 16 years in a grade-three WRCO role. These are the safety-critical ones that they’ve actually downgraded; in reality, that role has been deleted.

“As a WRCO, they wanted to downgrade me, which would mean losing about seven thousand pounds a year. We also lost night allowance, which was over a thousand pounds. This is immoral—they can’t do this. So we decided that the only thing we could do was to go out on strike.

“On the picket line, we’ve faced arrests, police presence with cameras, security guards, Section 14s [Public Order Act to restrict peaceful protests], and injunctions placed on us.

“Speaking for myself, this has only made me stronger. It’s got to be all out for us now, to the end. The ramifications of this strike are massive. If this fails, it’s going to reverberate across the country, especially in local authorities. This is a race to the bottom, an attack on jobs.

“For me, I look at the miners’ strike. They faced the might of the state, and we’re in the same situation. We’re being told that this strike can be won on a political level. But I still think that the picket lines are where it’s going to be won. The picket lines are really important.

“I’ve participated in a lot of strikes. For example, the strike in 2017 was big. It lasted three months, and what was key was controlling the vehicles, stopping them leaving the depots.

“What I don’t understand now is why the union doesn’t bring out the whole region? You know, get everyone out here.

“It’s a rogue council, and it’s a rogue government. They’re hiding behind the equal pay issue and they’re hiding behind bankruptcy. It’s just pure lies. But we’re not going to give in.”

Aluard, another loader with long service, added, “This strike has always been about stopping the removal of WRCO. I have worked for the council for 23 years, and then they take £8,000 a year from me. How am I meant to cope with that? I have four children.

“The Labour council created the WRCO position as a Grade 3 role, and now they take it away. How can they get away with that? It is totally wrong.

“They tried to redeploy me, but I would not accept it. We were told if we did not sign the new contract with lower pay and terms, we would be out of a job.

At first, we were refusing to accept the £8,000 compensation, but last July the council and Unite agreed a certain amount of money—between £16,000 and £20,000—but

this was never discussed with us, and then it was withdrawn.

“I was stressed when I heard that the Starmer government backed the council. Labour does not support the working class—they are for the bosses. I don’t trust any of the politicians; they are only saying they support us now because the local elections are coming up. I don’t think the working class is being listened to by any of them—they are just lying.

“Our morale is kept up by support from other workers who stop and listen and agree with our struggle. They know they will be next.

“We are treated as if we are nothing, but all the wealth comes from our hard work. We keep everything going. They just want to control everything—money and power. We cannot put up with that; we are trying to survive from one day to the next: you get paid one day, and the next it’s gone.

“You know, if workers stay together, we’ll win this. We must be united; this does need to become a national struggle.”

Smithfield

Dean, a loader who has been downgraded as a WRCO, was asked about the “ballpark deal” of a one-off payment advocated by Unite.

He said, “No, it wouldn’t be a victory at all if we accepted the lump-sum offer. The only victory would be if they left us alone, we stayed the same, and we got back compensation—not only for what we’ve already lost. We’ve had pay cuts before. I’ve been here 24 years. I’ve had nothing but pay cuts.

“When the government intervened, it made it bigger than just Birmingham. What they’re trying to do in Birmingham, they’re going to do it all around every single area, like Liverpool, London, Bradford. It will happen everywhere. If they break Birmingham, they can break the lot.”



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