

Third “Megapicket” held in Birmingham refuse workers strike as union bureaucracy appeals to Starmer

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A third “Megapicket” of refuse depots was held last Friday at three sites being struck by workers in dispute with Birmingham City Council (BCC).

The workers have been on strike for over a year, since January 6, 2025, and on indefinite strike since March last year. They are opposing the Labour-controlled authority’s imposition of brutal pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year by deleting the safety-critical role of 150 loaders—the Waste Collection and Recycling Officer (WRCO)—and a similar downgrading of drivers.

These are part of overall cuts of £300 million being imposed by the council and unelected commissioners appointed by the Conservative government in September 2023—maintained by the Starmer government since Labour came to office in July 2024.

The “Megapicket – 3D” was held at three yards in the city—Atlas, Perry Barr, and Smithfield—and two yards in Coventry, where the Labour authority has used its wholly owned subsidiary Tom White Waste to assist strike-breaking operations in Birmingham.

The Labour council once again shut the yards for the day to resume collections over the weekend, as they have done before. As with the previous events staged in May and July last year, the performative “solidarity” on show was a bogus affair, lacking any genuine mobilisation of the working class.

The megapickets were organised by the Strike Map group, in collaboration with the Stalinist *Morning Star* and a section of the left-talking Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Its aim was to portray the Birmingham workers’ strike as being on the cusp of victory, backed by a wave of “solidarity,” to conceal the fact that their strike is as isolated as ever.

This is the responsibility of the “leverage” strategy of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and National Lead Officer Onay Kasab, aimed at pressuring the council back to negotiations—ended in July. It has tied strikers up in futile PR stunts, without mobilising the working class against the

precedent being set by the Starmer government against any defiance shown to its austerity agenda.

After a six-month break from even any performative solidarity, the purpose of “Megapicket 3D” was to strengthen Graham’s hand in pushing Labour officials to return to the lump-sum payment offered but withdrawn in arbitration talks last July. The derisory compensation of between £14,000 and £20,000 per worker does not even make up for lost earnings. It represents a sellout of the fight Birmingham bin workers have waged to reverse the deletion of the WRCO role and downgrading of drivers.

Strike Map’s promise that “Thousands of trade unionists and supporters” would “descend on Birmingham ... in a major escalation of the city’s long-running bin strike” produced a few hundred participants—made up largely of pseudo-left groups dusting off their local trade union banners for a ritual outing.

There was a noticeable absence of any organised delegations of workers. No attempt was made to mobilise the membership of the 12 national trade unions—including some with hundreds of thousands of members—and the local Trades Union Congress bodies in Birmingham, Coventry, Wolverhampton, Manchester, and Oxford, who backed the Megapicket.

Instead, the focus was on encouraging illusions in a solution through parliamentary pressure and the government.

Writing in the *Morning Star*, Strike Map founders Henry Fowler and Rob Poole stated that the latest Megapicket would “certainly [be] the broadest—bringing together national trade unions, political parties, and, for the first time, politicians from Your Party, the Green Party, and the Labour Party.”

Speakers from these organisations lined up to call on Starmer—who has backed Birmingham City Council to the hilt in its vicious attack on the bin workers—to step forward as their saviour. Fire Brigades Union general secretary Steve Wright told the Smithfield picket, “The FBU will continue

to support Birmingham's refuse workers, and as a Labour Party affiliate we are calling on the Prime Minister to end this long-running dispute."

Fowler, introducing Labour "left" John McDonnell, said he was among 115 Labour councillors and MPs who signed a letter last month "to end these bin strikes." It was "time to end this dispute and time for the Labour government to intervene," declared Fowler.

McDonnell pointed to "a debate in Parliament in Westminster Hall last week, in which we were saying to the [Labour government] Minister, all we're asking you to do is get people around the table and start negotiating again. As a result of the pressure that you're putting on them, I think there will be a breakthrough in this current period."

Sowing illusions in Starmer, et al., and the council—which has spent at least £33 million to crush the strike—McDonnell stated that "one of the first steps for this government and this council to demonstrate solidarity is for them to settle this dispute, end the job cuts, end the cuts in pay". McDonnell knows that Unite is trying to "settle the dispute" with a lump-sum sellout, and will cheer the union when it does.

At the Atlas depot, Your Party MP Zarah Sultana declared, "This dispute was never inevitable, and it doesn't need to drag on. Birmingham City Council could end it today." This could be done by "a Labour council under a Labour government—a government that claims to stand up for working people while quietly watering down the Employment Rights Bill because it is in bed with bad bosses and millionaire donors."

Sultana has been making a left-wing pitch for Your Party, insisting that it cannot be a Labour Party Mark II and that workers should not be content with crumbs and should start challenging the domination of the billionaires.

But she suggests workers in Birmingham can do so by putting moral pressure on Starmer's government of the billionaires to pull back from the brutal assault it has mounted, as if this is some sort of misunderstanding. She says nothing about the Unite bureaucracy's isolation of the struggle, repeating Graham's "bad bosses" line to suggest better ones are available in a race-to-the-bottom capitalist economy of austerity and privatisation.

Unite National Lead Officer Kasab told the picket in Smithfield that he had a "special message for council workers at Unison and GMB [two other trade unions]... What's taking place with the refuse workers will be coming to other unions and other workers on the council. Join with us. Join with us now."

This is deeply cynical. It is not other council workers who are responsible for the isolation of the Birmingham bin strike, but the trade union bureaucracy: Kasab and Graham's counterparts in Unison and the GMB.

In a revealing comment, Strike Map said of its previous Megapickets: "On May 9 and July 25, escalated action successfully shut sites when Unite's injunction prevented workers from doing so themselves." This only underscores the whole trade union bureaucracy's decades of subservience to anti-strike laws, including the ban on secondary industrial action.

As the WSWS explained in opposition to the political pantomime of the "Megapicket":

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 [Birmingham City Council leader John] Cotton, the commissioners, and Starmer.

WSWS reporters spoke to some of the bin workers on the picket line during the Megapicket. See interviews here.



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