

Birmingham Labour council secures High Court injunction against support for striking bin workers

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Labour-run Birmingham City Council (BCC) has obtained a High Court injunction against protesters supporting a strike by the city's refuse workers. It prevents them from even gathering at the four yards covered by the dispute and came into effect on February 20.

The injunction not only extends the council's battery of attacks meant to break the resistance of 400 refuse loaders and drivers opposing drastic pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year and job losses, in a dispute now in its fourteenth month, which became an all-out strike from March 11. It sets a far-reaching legal precedent for the extension of anti-union laws to any form of strike or protest action by sympathising groups.

The most consequential implications are for non-unionised workers—the overwhelming majority, especially among younger generations.

The “Waste injunction against persons unknown” outlaws any obstruction to the movement of refuse lorries deployed in a major strike-breaking operation, which has involved the mass hiring of agency workers and support from outside councils, including the nearby Labour-run Coventry council and its arm's-length company, Tom White Waste. Any breach is punishable by up to two years' imprisonment, fines or seizure of assets for contempt of court.

The Starmer government has overseen the state-orchestrated attack on Birmingham bin workers from the beginning. Last March, when the BCC declared a “major incident” to grant itself unprecedented powers to conduct strike-breaking operations, including the use of military planners, Starmer rose in Parliament to declare, “We'll put in whatever additional support is needed.”

So far £34 million has been spent on crushing the resistance of a small but combative section of workers. The Labour authority running the UK's largest city declared insolvency (Section 114) in September 2023 to enforce, with unelected commissioners, £300 million worth of cuts over the past two years, devastating local services. This included a fire sale of assets worth £750 million and a 17.5 percent council tax increase.

The latest High Court injunction reinforces a previous

injunction last May, barring effective picketing by strikers, extending this to any third-party support. It sets a wider precedent by removing any means through which pressure can be exerted on an employer without it being deemed unlawful.

Unite, led by General Secretary Sharon Graham, acceded to the legal restraints last year, reducing pickets to six at each council yard as metal barriers were erected to pen workers in. It apologised in court in October for strikers' acts of defiance and has made no comment on the latest injunction directed at supporters.

The Starmer government, faced with popular opposition to austerity and the war drive it funds, is conducting lawfare against democratic rights. High Court injunctions against “persons unknown” were also used against pro-Palestinian campus protests by students demanding institutions sever economic ties with Israel and firms profiting from the mass murder.

The use of injunctions to curb protests on the grounds of protecting business operations and private property from “disruption” is at the heart of a widening dragnet striking at the heart of freedom of assembly and speech. They supplement the Public Order Act 2023 and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which have granted police and prosecutors unprecedented powers of arrest and imprisonment.

The erosion of the right to protest and prohibition of effective action against an employer raise fundamental issues about how to mobilise collective opposition in the working class against a government dependent on authoritarian methods to impose its hated political agenda.

Significantly, this attack is spearheaded by the Labour Party, founded by the working class to defend the right to strike, and enabled by trade unions, dominated by a bureaucracy which long ago broke with any tradition of class struggle.

The latest High Court injunction exposes the performative solidarity staged around the three “Mega-pickets” in May, July and January 30. This has not assisted Birmingham strikers or advanced a broader fightback. They have been used rather to block opposition to the Starmer government, which has treated the dispute as a test bed for repressive measures and austerity in

preparation for attacks on the wider working class.

These actions provided a platform for left-talking bureaucrats to issue empty platitudes when no secondary action has been organised. Attended by around a thousand, with Unite mobilising very few of its members, the demonstrations were the brainchild of the groups Strike Map, the Stalinist Morning Star, and pseudo-left organisations like the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party.

The one-day closure of council yards, falsely hailed by Strike Map as a return to mass picketing without risking defiance of the anti-union laws by Unite and its 1.2 million members, has instead been met with an intensified strike-breaking operation.

Every supposed figurehead of the trade union and Labour bureaucracy claiming support for the “Brum strike” has meekly called for Starmer to “intervene”, when his government has given council leader John Cotton its full backing.

A February 18 interview with “Person’s Unknown,” run by the Socialist Party, conveyed the message that a deal could be struck between Unite’s leadership and those who have tightened the legal noose around workers’ necks, stating the dispute “will only end when the council negotiates a fair settlement.”

This “fair settlement” echoes Graham’s own position for accepting the terms demanded by the authority and the Starmer government: enforcing pay cuts and job losses in return for a one-off payment of £14,000 to £20,000 per worker, offered last May but withdrawn after talks ended.

In the meantime, Graham and Unite National Lead Officer Onay Kasab have chipped away at workers’ resistance by isolating their struggle and presiding over a rout. They have worked to erase the red lines drawn by bin workers in their fight against the abolition of the safety-critical Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) role and pay cuts of up to £8,000.

Eight months ago, the Labour authority began issuing notices of compulsory redundancy under an explicit fire-and-rehire policy. In December it stated that all former WRCOs had been “successfully redeployed” and “the majority of downgraded drivers” had accepted new roles. This included 80 voluntary and three compulsory redundancies. Unite instructed workers to sign away pay and conditions or face dismissal.

The lump-sum payment sought by Graham sanctions long-term wage reductions and workers returning under onerous and unsafe conditions through the downgraded contracts. It would allow the Unite apparatus to get its feet back under the table with Labour at local and national level and strengthen a corporatist partnership used to police struggles across the country.

The “trade union movement” cited by the SP references an ossified bureaucracy, dedicated to stifling opposition from below among the millions it claims to represent. The entire bureaucracy has used anti-strike laws for decades to discipline members and collude with profit-driven restructuring. The

Starmer government has retained the core of these restraints, including against secondary picketing, and is adding to them through injunctions which the union bureaucracy is helping to enforce.

The issue facing Birmingham strikers confronts every worker in charting a new way forward for a genuine revival of the class struggle, based on the development of rank-and-file committees against the interests of the capitalist oligarchy—enforced jointly by the union bureaucracy and the Starmer government.

The WSWS insisted:

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

There is now a greater imperative for conducting this type of struggle, amid the Starmer government’s deepened involvement in the war of aggression against Iran. The spiralling costs of this will be loaded on the backs of the working class through hikes in petrol prices, household energy bills and the cost of food.

This poses the need to unify the fights against social inequality, against attacks on democratic rights and against war through a movement of the working class against their root cause: capitalism and its criminal oligarchy.



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