

Birmingham bin strike: Labour council leader offers talks with Unite on sellout terms

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John Cotton, leader of the Labour-run Birmingham City Council, issued a video last Thursday inviting Unite for talks to end the 14-month dispute with the city's bin workers. Since January last year, refuse loaders and drivers have waged a determined fight against the destruction of their jobs and crippling pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year.

These would be the first talks since last July, when Cotton walked away from negotiations. His pose as a peacemaker has been timed ahead of the May 7 local elections across England, Scotland and Wales, in 5,000 seats and 136 authorities where Labour faces political oblivion.

Cotton presides over the largest unitary authority in the UK, which has slashed £300 million from local services over the past two years under a regime of unelected commissioners. The assault on bin workers has spearheaded attacks on the pay and employment terms of the council's workforce, part of dismantling services for a population of 1.1 million. This shock therapy has included a fire sale of public assets worth £750 million to property developers.

The local elections will be the largest test of Labour since its July 2024 election. They are being held under conditions of a deepening political crisis, as the government of Keir Starmer intensifies its support for the US-led illegal war against Iran, defying public opposition.

In his video, Cotton states: "We have reached out to Unite to end this stalemate. The people of Birmingham want this resolved, and the workers want to go back to work."

Just two days earlier, the striking workers were ruled in breach of a High Court injunction obtained by the authority last July, which effectively outlawed picketing—limiting numbers on picket lines to six and

enforcing compliance through police kettling behind metal barriers, backed by threats of fines and imprisonment. For the repeated offence of slow walking in front of strike-breaking trucks, Unite has been fined £286,000.

Unite made no challenge to the draconian ruling, with General Secretary Sharon Graham simply describing it as "pathetic."

While Unite insists that workers must accept laws stripping them of the right to strike, the Labour authority has repeatedly bypassed the law. It threatened to blacklist agency workers hired by contractor Job & Talent to break the strike, after 40 of them went on strike in December.

For an authority that had declared insolvency, money has proven to be no object when it comes to strike-breaking. In addition to enlisting agency workers, waste collection services have been drafted in from neighbouring authorities, including Labour-run Coventry, to overcome resistance from just 400 workers across three Birmingham waste depots. At least £33 million has been spent on this operation since limited stoppages escalated into all-out action on March 11 last year.

The Starmer government backed BCC's strike-breaking from the outset, with the prime minister pledging, "We'll put in whatever additional support is needed."

Cotton has stated that further negotiations with Unite "cannot undo the progress made on fair pay and grading for all workers."

This "progress" has seen the adoption of a fire-and-rehire policy since talks ended eight months ago. After Cotton declared the council had "reached the end of what it could offer," BCC moved to abolish the safety-critical role of Waste Recycling and Collection Officer

(WRCO), eliminating around 150 jobs and reducing crew sizes by a quarter. The council reported in December that all those employed as WRCO had been “successfully redeployed,” and that “the majority of downgraded drivers” had accepted new roles. None of this was “voluntary”, including 83 redundancies.

The defence of the WRCO role was the original basis for launching the strike, with similar pay cuts and downgrading extended to drivers who had walked out from day one in solidarity.

Graham opposed any mobilisation of Unite’s one million members to defeat this frontal assault, setting a wider precedent that will be used by councils elsewhere. The determined stand by Birmingham bin workers has been diverted into PR stunts, including a union-funded publicity campaign accusing Cotton of being “missing in action.” This was part of a strategy aimed at isolating strikers, with Unite officials advising them to sign contracts downgrading their pay and terms of employment, or risk immediate firing, while holding out the hope of a negotiated settlement.

The Graham-led union apparatus has been managing opposition rather than mobilising it against Starmer and his local henchman. Unite’s Policy Conference last July was compelled to register popular sentiment with a motion to suspend Cotton and his fellow councillors and then Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner from Unite membership. It was a token gesture.

A broader mobilisation against the Starmer government was never proposed by Britain’s second-largest union. It helped put Labour in office, based on false claims that a Starmer government would end years of Conservative austerity through its Employment Rights Bill.

A further piece of political theatre was Unite’s announcement earlier this month that Unite’s levy to the Labour Party would be reduced by 40 percent—around £580,000. This still leaves Unite one of the largest union contributors, bankrolling this right-wing, pro-business entity with £870,000.

Graham’s duplicitous role was again on display after a rally of Birmingham bin workers at the Atlas depot on March 19. Following a tub-thumping speech claiming that Unite was standing by its members, she told the BBC about her meeting with Starmer at 10 Downing Street the day before. She relayed telling Starmer that workers were in some doubt whose side

the government was on and were “scratching their heads” over who Labour represents. According to Graham, the meeting ended with agreement that “we need to get a deal over the line.”

Cotton can demand that Unite be “realistic” in renewed talks, comfortable in the knowledge that Graham has already accepted the abolition of the WRCO role and the downgrading of drivers’ pay and employment terms. She has even stated that lump sum payments of between £14,000 and £20,000 per worker are a more cost-effective way for the council to end the dispute.

Striking bin workers have not waged a determined 14-month struggle to accept the permanent loss of earnings and downgraded terms, as they told the WSWs in January. What has been accepted on a de facto basis by the Unite apparatus must now be challenged by rank-and-file workers to prevent a final sell-out.

As the WSWs article circulated on the picket lines stated, to assert rank-and-file control: “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, not the stage-managed “mega-pickets” organised by the Stalinist and pseudo-left groups gravitating around Unite, is the only genuine path to building working-class solidarity.



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