

# Unite's secret talks with Reform UK: Isolating Birmingham bin strike and embracing the far-right

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Unite union officials have held secret talks with representatives of Reform UK over ending the 15-month Birmingham bin strike. The meeting is the filthy product of Unite's isolation of a struggle that has pitted a small but determined group of 400 refuse workers against the Labour Party, locally and nationally, and its brutal austerity agenda.

Strike action became all out from March last year against the Labour-run council's abolition of the safety-critical Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) role, affecting 150 bin loaders, crippling pay cuts of up to £8,000, and a reduction in crew sizes by a quarter, with a similar downgrading exercise impacting bin lorry drivers.

Unite's attempt to portray Reform UK—a far-right, anti-immigrant, pro-business party—as a potential ally is politically criminal, with implications far beyond the Birmingham dispute.

*The Times* reported Unite officials met senior advisors to Reform UK leader Nigel Farage on April 14 at a Holiday Inn on the outskirts of Birmingham to discuss a potential settlement of the protracted dispute with the Labour authority led by John Cotton. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham was not present, with talks conducted by trusted emissaries.

The meeting was held in secret to avoid backlash against getting into bed with the far-right party.

It took place amid a deep crisis for Keir Starmer's Labour government, which faces a meltdown in local elections on May 7 covering thousands of council seats across England, Scotland and Wales. This reflects widespread anger over its austerity programme, such as the devastating £300 million cuts imposed in Birmingham, the UK's second-largest city, across the council workforce.

Unite's engagement with Reform UK lends credence to its efforts to pose as a worker-friendly alternative to Labour that will in fact be used to push a further shift to the right in the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

A Reform UK spokesperson who attended the talks with

Unite, speaking to *The Times*, complained the Labour council's strike breaking operation "has wasted £34 million already on the dispute... If Reform UK are elected in Birmingham, we will resolve the bin strike and end the absurd waste of millions of pounds on agency staff by prioritising more appropriate, stable, permanent jobs that offer better conditions for staff and better value for taxpayers."

All of which is meaningless but successfully capitalises on Labour's own rotten record. There was no mention naturally of restoring the WRCO roles, which bin workers launched their strike to protect or of reversing similar downgrading and pay cuts for drivers.

The Labour council has only been able to impose its agenda using fire-and-rehire tactics because of Unite's isolation of the dispute. Graham has refused to mobilise the union's 1.2 million members in support. The council has relied on High Court injunctions, in place since last July, to restrict picketing and intimidate strikers—measures Unite has dutifully enforced.

Reform UK can pose as being amenable to an agreement on Unite's terms because the Graham leadership has gutted the demands of Birmingham bin workers and replaced them with "a fair settlement" including one-off lump sum payments of between £14,000 and £20,000. This fails to compensate bin workers for the tens of thousands of pounds lost in future earnings and accepts the new workplace regime eradicating hard-won terms and conditions.

If the Unite leadership was engaged in any opposition rather than running the resistance of Birmingham bin workers into the ground and offering a sellout, Reform UK would not be sitting down to discuss any settlement.

Unite officials cosy up to the anti-migrant xenophobes of Reform UK, especially in a city with a 30 percent Asian and 10 percent black population, is obscene.

Party leader Nigel Farage is a close friend of Donald Trump and has advocated a "British style DOGE" to cut

local government spending—a reference to oligarch Elon Musk’s mass firings of hundreds of thousands of federal workers and dismantling of vital public services in the United States.

Farage provided an exclusive with the *Daily Mail* on Friday which laid out what Reform UK would do in power if it replaced the Starmer government.

The ex-banker demanded brutal cuts to welfare provision, targeting those on disability benefits, threatening that “there’ll be riots, and there’ll be strikes and there’ll be protests, and we know all of that, but that’s what we’re going to have to do – it has to be done. We just can’t afford it now.”

This is the party Unite officials are promoting as intermediaries in Birmingham, while normalising its toxic nationalism and xenophobia. Conservative shadow justice minister Robert Jenrick made infamous hate filled remarks against immigrants and the working class of Birmingham in March 2025 after visiting the Handsworth area of the city, complaining he had not seen “another white face” and “it was as close I’ve come to a slum in this country.”

Jenrick is the most-high profile of 21 Tory MPs to have defected to Reform UK to advance its far-right agenda.

The turn by Unite officials towards Reform UK is deliberately designed to block political opposition to the Starmer government and Labour from the left.

Graham’s criticisms of Labour and insistence that Labour must be pressured to show it is “the party of workers” serves to shield a government that has overseen strike-breaking operations involving a scab workforce based on agency workers.

The embrace of Reform UK is in line with Unite’s own promotion of nationalism and militarism. Graham’s most heated rows with the government have centred on her complaints that Labour is not moving fast enough on military spending, including threatening that Chancellor Rachel Reeves should be sacked if this was not speeded up. If Reeves could not “grasp the concept” of backing British industry “and doesn’t care where things are made then she should go.” She described a massive rearmament programme as “vision for Britain.”

Unite’s agenda of militarism and economic protectionism, so far pursued in collaboration with the Starmer government, is fundamentally incompatible with the defence of workers’ jobs, pay and conditions, or public services, all of which are being sacrificed on the altar of increased military expenditure, trade war and further tax concessions to big business. But it is entirely compatible with support for a Reform UK government by bureaucracy that functions not as a vehicle for workers’ resistance, but as an instrument for its suppression.

The Holiday Inn meeting between Unite and Reform UK is a damning exposure of the role of the pseudo-left, including the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and the Revolutionary Communist Party, which have backed Graham, promoted the union’s bogus “mega-pickets” while the strike was systematically isolated, and glorified Graham’s spats with Starmer as representing a shift to the left by the union bureaucracy.

The SWP, which routinely uses opposition to Reform UK to politically rehabilitate the Labour and trade union bureaucracy as “allies” in the fight against the far-right, now complains that “Unions should be preparing to resist Reform UK’s racism and its attacks on workers after the May elections, not cosyng up to them.”

The RCP, for its part, wrote in March that Unite cutting its affiliation fees to Labour by 40 percent on the anniversary of the Birmingham dispute was “a step in the right direction” and called on her and other union leaders to stop being “hesitant”, adopt a socialist program and lead a “national industrial movement to bring down this hated government.” Instead, Graham has made her overtures to Farage as a new potential partner in a government of national unity in support of militarism and war.

The Socialist Equality Party has insisted throughout the Birmingham dispute that the fight against the Starmer government, against anti-migrant attacks, the rise of the far-right, austerity and war mean ending the strangulation of the class struggle by the union bureaucracy. It requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees to transfer decision-making to workers themselves and unify struggles across workplaces and sectors and forging a new leadership for the working class, the SEP.



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