

# Unite union peddles sellout deal to end Birmingham bin workers strike

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29 April 2026

Labour-run Birmingham City Council (BCC) leader John Cotton announced Monday that a negotiated settlement was “now within sight” to end the 15-month dispute with the city’s refuse workers.

Cotton walked away from negotiations last July. His return to the negotiating table represents a rapprochement with Unite to finalise an agreement on the authority’s terms—with the union leadership being relied upon to spin the sellout.

Unite’s April 27 press release described an “improved offer based on the ‘ballpark deal’” agreed in arbitration talks last year. What is being presented as a breakthrough are reportedly lump sum payments per worker of £16,000. This is offered in return for ending resistance to pay cuts, the cull of jobs and overhaul of terms and conditions.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham claimed, “The move made today by the leader of the council is a vindication of the bin workers’ struggle for a decent deal.”

This is a fraud. Bin workers launched their strike to oppose the abolition of the safety-critical role of Waste Collection and Recycling Officers (WRCO), affecting around 150 bin loaders. Graham repeatedly told the press she was backing members who faced overnight pay cuts of up to £8,000. Yet the “compensation” payments eliminate these jobs permanently, entrenching long-term loss of earnings amounting to tens of thousands of pounds per worker over the coming years.

The elimination of the WRCO role is designed to cut crew sizes by a quarter. Downgrading has been extended to bin lorry drivers, who walked out alongside loaders and have suffered similar attacks on pay and conditions, in some cases up to £10,000.

Unite now describes the proposed one-off payments as a “decent deal following their job evaluation regrading.” This is a whitewash of methods deployed by the Labour authority to enforce the process Graham previously

described as “fire and rehire.”

Since talks collapsed last July, the council issued a Section 188 notice to impose contract changes under threat of dismissal. In December it confirmed that all former WRCOs had been “successfully redeployed” and “the majority of downgraded drivers” had accepted other roles, while making 83 bin workers redundant. Unite officials advised striking workers to sign the contracts or face dismissal as it did not lift a finger to mobilise its 1.2 million against the imposition.

Graham has effectively rubber-stamped this “job evaluation” to rehabilitate Cotton—who oversaw the intimidation tactics—allowing the council leader to parade himself as an honest broker rather than Labour’s attack dog against the strikers. Cotton said of the proposed deal: “I want our workforce to be able to return to work and help us deliver the quality refuse and recycling services the people of this city deserve. That’s why throughout this dispute I have resisted those who would dismiss the striking workers instead of negotiating.”

Behind the backs of striking workers, both sides are engaged in a coordinated operation to peddle the agreement which they insist cannot be scrutinised. Cotton said the council cannot sign off the deal until after the May 7 local elections, while Unite insists the full details must remain “confidential” until a formal offer is made.

Unite has admitted that the deal has been under preparation “for months,” through back channels involving Labour figures and a former senior union official—West Midlands Labour Mayor Richard Parker and Lord Brendan Barber.

A former general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, Barber later served the corporate and financial elite at the Bank of England on its Court of Directors. He functioned as a fixer in major industrial struggles, including at Royal Mail in 2023, where he assisted Communication Workers Union General Secretary Dave

Ward in arbitration talks that led directly to the betrayal of the national strike and the imposition of a brutal restructuring agreement dubbed the “surrender document” by postal workers.

Unite national officer Onay Kasab has been promoting the sell-out as “a genuine offer,” and heaped praise on Graham for working closely behind the scenes with Labour at local and national level.

Kasab told *Birmingham Live* that senior Labour figures, including Prime Minister Keir Starmer, “were more than aware,” adding: “Sharon Graham has been lobbying at the very highest levels of Labour to get this ballpark deal back on the table, and that’s what she has achieved.”

The celebration of collusion between the union bureaucracy and the Starmer government—which has backed to the hilt BCC’s strikebreaking operations and High Court injunctions against refuse workers—lays bare the role of the pseudo-left within the union apparatus, represented by Onay Kasab, a Socialist Party member.

Cotton’s announcement of a framework agreement with Unite is a desperate attempt to contain a political crisis confronting Labour—not only in Birmingham but across England, Scotland and Wales—in next week’s local elections. The vote is taking place amid mounting anger over austerity, including opposition to the £300 million in cuts overseen by Cotton over the past two years on frontline services in Birmingham, with the attack on bin workers the industrial spearhead.

The Unite bureaucracy is preparing to sacrifice bin workers to stabilise the Starmer government and preserve its own position as an industrial enforcer.

The dispute has been used as a testing ground for austerity and state-backed strikebreaking and fire and rehire policies, setting a precedent for ever greater attacks on the working class.

Unite officials held secret discussions a fortnight ago in Birmingham with the far-right Reform UK over a similar sellout deal if it won control over the council from Labour. This underscores the essential role of the union bureaucracy: to impose austerity and suppress resistance regardless of which political party holds office.

Graham has opposed any recognition that the fight by the bin workers required a confrontation with the Starmer government. At Unite’s policy conference last July, the union was compelled to bow to popular sentiment and remove Cotton and Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner from membership over their role in “fire and rehire” against the Birmingham strikers. But this was left as a gesture rather than the basis for mobilising the 1.2 million

membership to defeat the attack.

The acceptance by the Unite leadership of strikebreaking operations and High Court injunctions was not due primarily to avoiding financial penalties, but a fear of the traction a mobilisation of the working class would have found had it developed outside of its bureaucratic control. As Unite’s draft agreement demonstrates, the Graham leadership is dedicated to restoring normal service with a government overseeing austerity and military rearmament funded by deeper cuts in public services and social provision.

Bin workers should reject the attempts to enforce a sellout through the direct collusion between Graham and the Labour government.

The WSWS has encouraged striking workers to take their dispute out of the hands of the union apparatus, turning to the millions of workers being thrown into struggle. As we wrote:

“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 Cotton, the commissioners and Starmer.”



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