Birmingham bin workers' struggle: Behind the media talk of an "imminent" deal lies a sellout — the rank and file must take control

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A deal to end the Birmingham bin workers' indefinite strike, now in its 18th month, is close to being finalised according to media reports. The claims of a settlement have come not from those workers defending their pay and livelihoods against strike-breaking and dismissal threats, but from those who have spearheaded the austerity measures against them.

Labour deputy leader Lucy Powell announced on the BBC last Thursday that a deal was "imminent, it is on the table". This followed similar claims on September 4 by Roger Harman, Liberal Democrat leader of Birmingham City Council, whose party heads a new administration with the Greens and Independents after Labour lost control in May elections.

The secrecy surrounding the proposed deal is a warning. Powell claimed, "the council has had to work closely with the workforce to make sure job security and pay requirements are there for workers as well."

Powell's attempt to portray the Labour government as an honest broker working towards an honourable settlement is a political fraud.

Around 400 bin lorry drivers and loaders, members of Unite, began strike action against the Labour authority on January 6, 2025, and it became indefinite from March 11. This followed the imposition of pay cuts of up to £8,000 and the elimination of 150 safety-critical loader jobs—the Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) role—to slash crew sizes by a quarter, with downgrades and pay cuts then extended to drivers.

The Labour council led by John Cotton responded with extraordinary strike-breaking powers. On March 31, it declared a "major incident", seeking to criminalise the strike while drafting in agency labour and enlisting neighbouring authorities and private contractors, coordinated by military planners and police. Starmer pledged, "We'll put in whatever additional support is needed." By May this year, the council, claiming bankruptcy, had spent £34 million on the strike-breaking operation.

The Labour authority openly adopted fire and rehire last July after walking away from talks, issuing Section 188 notices ordering loaders and drivers to accept downgrading or face dismissal. By December, it had downgraded loaders from Grade 3 to 2 and drivers from Grade 4 to 3, while making 83 redundancies.

Unite officials' false narrative of a fair settlement

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham has not issued a union press release on the Birmingham bin dispute since June. It stated that after months of closed-door talks with Cotton, a "good deal" had been reached in March, but it was never put to striking workers as Labour lost control of the council. She stated, "We look forward to the elected members of the council agreeing the process for the implementation of the deal."

The agreement drawn up by Graham and Cotton crossed every red line for Birmingham bin workers – starting with acceptance of the elimination of the WRCO role and the downgrading of loaders and drivers, in return for a £16,000 one-off payment. This was Graham's asking price for ending Birmingham bin workers' resistance, entrenching long-term wage cuts, and overhauling terms and conditions.

Powell, now touting an "imminent deal", had praised Graham's efforts with Cotton: "I know how hard the Labour leader John Cotton and our Labour mayor Richard Parker have worked behind the scenes with Unite and others, to find a resolution which is in the interests of the city, its residents, its workers and its future."

Striking workers told the WSWS in February that the proposals outlined during talks between Cotton and Unite went against their strike demands, with Unite officials telling them it was the best outcome they could expect.

Unite's talks with Cotton took place behind the fig leaf of the third "Mega-Picket" at the Birmingham waste depots. These were the brainchild of Strike Map, assembling left-talking union bureaucrats supported by the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and Stalinist *Morning Star* to conceal their isolation of striking bin workers.

The same union officials offering verbal support at the "mega-

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pickets” blocked any broader mobilisation behind the strikers. The real “solidarity” was not with Birmingham bin workers but with the Labour government, shown by calls from the assembled bureaucrats that Starmer endorse the proposed deal. Their concern was to pronounce a “victory” regardless of the sellout terms.

The lessons and way forward

The Birmingham bin workers’ struggle must not end in defeat at the hands of the Unite bureaucracy. Graham is desperate to reset relations between the working class and the Labour government under Prime Minister Andy Burnham—a government pledged to deepening austerity and war.

Birmingham bin workers must establish a rank-and-file committee to enforce direct oversight of negotiations, agree their non-negotiable demands and mobilise workers facing similar austerity cuts in Birmingham and nationally.

Labour’s flagship council in the UK’s second-largest city had been the launchpad for austerity, first under the Conservative government and then under Starmer. Its declaration of a Section 114 “bankruptcy” notice in September 2023 was engineered through inflated estimates of the cost of settling a protracted legal claim for equal pay involving mostly female workers. The final cost, established at the end of last year, was £250 million—around a third of the £650-£750 million originally cited by the council.

Section 114 was invoked to provide a pretext for draconian measures – bringing in unelected commissioners to enforce £300 million in cuts to vital services and council jobs over two years.

Labour sought to justify its austerity measures, including a council-wide regrading scheme, by claiming it was addressing pay discrimination. It involved not a levelling up but a levelling down of pay and conditions.

Pseudo-left groups have portrayed Graham as leading a resurgence of militant trade unionism, yet the Unite bureaucracy refused any wider mobilisation of Unite’s 1.2 million members to defeat Labour’s strike-breaking. Her reduction in the levy paid to the Labour Party serves to deflect workers’ anger into a harmless channel while claiming that under pressure Labour can “be the party of workers.”

Graham’s promotion as a “militant” union leader has been used to chip away at the resistance of Birmingham bin workers while Unite has kept the strike isolated. Unite has complied with High Court injunctions used to criminalise effective picketing, with strikers kettled behind steel barriers by police under threat of fine or imprisonment. For the repeated offence of its members slow walking in front of strike-breaking trucks, Unite was fined £286,000 by the High Court and dutifully paid it. Unite officials instructed workers to sign the downgrading of their pay and terms under the threat of fire and rehire.

The conditions for a wider mobilisation of the working class exist. Across England, dozens of local authorities are facing severe financial distress, with the government providing exceptional financial support to 39 councils for 2026-27. Several have issued Section 114 notices, while others remain under statutory intervention or have been forced to seek exceptional borrowing powers while pursuing the sale of council assets. The assault on Birmingham’s workforce is part of a wider offensive: councils are reducing services, cutting jobs and restructuring workforces to meet financial pressures created by decades of central government funding cuts.

Last Thursday in Scotland, Glasgow City Council under the minority control of the Scottish National Party and with the support of councillors from the Greens announced its intention to 'fire and rehire' 24,000 of its employees to implement pay cuts of up to £11,500. The council has only pulled back at the last minute, based on Unite, GMB and Unison re-entering talks to finalise proposals for a divisive new pay system that would leave 11 percent of affected workers with reduced earnings.

Birmingham bin workers have won the respect of workers around the country for the heroic fight they have taken up. They have not waged a 20-month struggle to accept a repackaging of the cuts through a top-down operation by the Labour government, the Liberal Democrat-Green coalition now in charge of the council in collusion with the Unite bureaucracy.

The full contents of the proposed agreement must be disclosed immediately to the rank and file. It is the strikers who must decide whether it meets their demands, not highly paid Unite functionaries prepared to sign away workers’ hard-won rights. The fight at Birmingham must be transformed into a political and industrial counter-offensive by council workers everywhere against the drive by Labour, the SNP, Liberal Democrats and Greens to impose billions more in austerity cuts.

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