Glasgow City Council reinstates fire-and-rehire threat against thousands of council workers

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Glasgow City Council (GCC) has ended a "pause" on its fire-and-rehire threat, reinstating it on Thursday against thousands of council workers represented by trade union Unison. They face losing up to £11,500 annually through the council's proposed pay and regrading structure.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) minority-led administration, with the backing of Scottish Green councillors, issued a fire-and-rehire threat against its entire 24,000 non-teaching workforce last week, on September 24. Dismissal notice letters due to be sent to coercively re-engage workers on a new contract with inferior pay, terms and conditions were paused the next day.

This was to allow a resumption of talks this week with representatives of Unison, Unite and the GMB. The talks broke down after Unison refused to ballot its members on the contents of the council's proposals.

On Thursday, Ricky Bell, SNP council leader, claimed, "We listened carefully throughout these negotiations and went the extra mile to address concerns and improve the offer."

Bell said the offer involved a one-year extension of "protection" against the pay cuts—a derisory offer designed to entrench a permanent loss of earnings. He made clear the threat of fire and rehire would be resumed, adding: "Although Unison's actions bring that pause to an end, we are working with Unite and GMB to ensure that their members are not dismissed and re-engaged."

Neither Unite nor the GMB has indicated they will break off negotiations with Glasgow City Council in the face of threatened mass dismissal notices to enforce pays cuts against Unison members.

This abject performance is in line with a package they have helped finalise that is entirely regressive.

As the WSWS explained: "Under the planned proposals workers have been informed that they fall in green, white or red circle categories. Green circle workers, (63 percent) will get an increase of sorts; white circle workers (26 percent), will stay the same; while 11 percent, 60 percent of whom are women, will lose out after transitional arrangements expire next year."

According to the *Daily Record*, domestic abuse workers, janitors, cleaners, park workers and parking attendants will be among the worst affected, alongside care home staff, low level management and cleansing workers. One male parking attendant said he was informed he was going to lose £3,500 annually.

Domestic abuse advocacy workers with the ASSIST court advocacy service are among the hardest hit. The *Record* was informed that staff at the service called in sick after being told they stand to lose £11,500 annually.

Unison members face the sharp end of these pay cuts. This accounts for the reluctance of its officials to put the proposals to members. But Unison is not opposing the cuts outright. Instead, they have angled for three years of "protection" for the 2,000 workers facing detriment. Unison is seeking to prevent, not organise, opposition to the permanent loss of earnings. A council worker noted on Unison's Facebook page: "Three years' pay protection still leaves affected workers knowing that a pay cut is coming. It delays the loss; it does not prevent it."

That some of the hardest-hit council employees are women explodes the claim that GCC's new pay and regrading structure is aimed at ending discrimination. Legal actions and a powerful strike in 2018 by 8,000 city council workers, mostly women, demanding redress for decades of underpayment in social care and catering led to a 2023 settlement with GCC, with a payout of £770 million in back pay to current and former staff.

The funding of this compensation package was used as a pretext to hand over popular institutions such as the Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Kelvin Hall and Glasgow's Museum of Modern Art to arms-length operators. The city's cultural future was thereby mortgaged to global financial markets, with repayment costs of over £1.5 billion to outfits

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such as Bermuda-based insurer Assured Guaranty.

GCC is paying such exorbitant costs to the financial aristocracy while enforcing pay cuts and threatening council workers with impoverishment.

The events in Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, provide a far wider political exposure. The SNP has long been promoted by the trade union bureaucracy as a more worker-friendly alternative to the Conservatives or Labour in Westminster, while the Greens have sought to capitalise on anti-austerity sentiment.

SNP and Green councillors voted together at GCC's City Administration Committee on August 20 for the pay-and-grading restructure involving thousands of pounds worth of cuts to council workers' pay. A report commissioned by the council made clear that, "options could include dismissal of existing contracts and an offer of re-engagement on revised terms and conditions." The SNP and Greens voted to endorse this draconian agenda, voting against a Labour amendment to rule out the use of fire and rehire.

Labour's attempt to posture as an opponent of fire and rehire is a fraud. Last year, Labour-led Birmingham City Council in England used fire and rehire to downgrade the roles of striking bin workers fighting the elimination of 150 safety-critical jobs and pay cuts of up to £8,000. The Unite bureaucracy is now seeking only lump-sum payments in return for ending workers' resistance.

New legislation by the Labour government set to be enacted on January 1, 2027, making dismissal for refusing contract changes automatically an unfair dismissal does not actually outlaw fire and rehire. The Employment Rights Act, negotiated with big business, comes with loopholes. The Act makes an exception for employers legitimising fire and rehire where there is "evidence of financial difficulties that were affecting or were likely to affect their viability."

Some of the most bitter disputes of recent years have been triggered by fire and rehire.

In 2021, 7,000 British Gas engineers struck against a fire and rehire attempt to cut their wages by 20 percent. The same year, 291 workers at Jacobs Douwe Egberts, having struck against savage pay cuts, were presented with dismissal notices for refusing an inferior contract. Both disputes were isolated by the GMB and Unite bureaucracies and resolved on detrimental terms they agreed with the employers.

Most notoriously, in 2022, DP World-owned P&O Ferries sacked 800 workers, replacing them in a military-style operation with a replacement scab workforce on drastically reduced conditions. The RMT leadership and Nautilus International prevented workers from taking any action beyond pointless appeals to the Tory government and P&O.

Last Friday, following emergency talks chaired by Scottish Deputy First Minister Jenny Gilruth, the mass-sacking threat by GCC had been suspended to allow further talks to take place. Gilruth, who is also Scottish Finance Secretary, intervened to declare her preference that any cuts are delivered "in line with the principles of fair work"—that is, through negotiation with the union apparatus.

This is viewed by the SNP as necessary preparation for the Scottish government's plans to sack as many as 20,000 public sector workers, merge 14 health and social care boards, and reorganise Scotland's 32 councils, including GCC, into as few as six regional authorities. Such a scale of assault, threatening hundreds of thousands of workers and incalculable levels of disruption to public services, is inconceivable without the trade union apparatus firmly on board.

A determinedly fought dispute by a united local authority workforce in Glasgow is the last thing the SNP or the union officials want.

Labour local authorities, no less than the Labour government in Westminster, its Tory predecessors, or the SNP in Edinburgh, are committed to subordinating every aspect of social spending to the fight for global competitiveness, attracting investment capital to "their" fiefdoms on the basis of low wages and tax breaks to investors, while seeking to divide a combative working class.

The resources to fund equal pay without cuts exist but are held captive by the same financial oligarchy that extracts billions from the city through debt servicing. Seizing that wealth requires a social and political struggle against the financial oligarchy and all the parties that support it—including Labour, the Greens and the SNP.

The necessary and urgent defence of local authority workers' pay and conditions, and of the essential social and cultural services on which huge numbers of people depend, can go forward only in a struggle against the stranglehold of the trade union apparatus. Independent rank-and-file organisations should be set up in every workplace to discuss a way forward, prepare and coordinate a unified struggle across sectoral and union boundaries, forging an alliance with health and education workers and service users facing a similar assault.

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