Glasgow City Council workers must Vote “No”, build rank-and-file fightback against regrading and cuts

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Workers at Glasgow City Council (GCC) and its Arm’s-Length External Organisation (ALEOs)—Glasgow Life, City Property and Job and Business Glasgow—are voting on a regrading package impacting the entire non-teaching workforce of around 24,000 workers.

The vote, organised by the Unison trade union which has by far the largest membership, is due to conclude November 23. A ballot by GMB members closed on 9 November, but no result has been announced. Unite the Union is also balloting its members.

The ballots were demanded by Scottish National Party (SNP)-controlled GCC. The new package, passed in August by the City Administration Committee with the support of the Greens, is officially presented as making GCC compliant with equal pay legislation. Some workers will face pay cuts of up to £11,500.

GCC threatened to impose the new contracts through a mass “fire and rehire” operation. This was only withdrawn after Unison agreed to ballot its members, falling into line with the other unions.

At no stage was any joint mobilisation suggested against this blatant attempt to intimidate workers into accepting inferior pay and conditions.

Since the 1980s, competitive tendering for public sector contracts, introduced by the Tories and carried forward by successive Labour and Conservative administrations in Westminster and Holyrood, has led to large numbers of low-paid, largely female workers being employed in support, catering and care roles. A wave of equal pay legal actions against local authorities has since resulted in huge compensation bills.

In 2007, GCC introduced a Workforce Pay and Benefits Review to address inequalities. The Glasgow review ended up in court, however, and triggered a two-day strike of social care and learning support workers in 2018. When the SNP took over GCC the same year, it settled some of the historical claims by mortgaging a raft of the city’s cultural holdings, following a practice already started by the previous Labour administration, and set about a new regrading operation.

This is ongoing. While 63 percent of staff (those in the so-called green circle) who have completed the regrading have been informed their pay will increase and 26 percent (white circle) will see no change, some 11 percent (red circle) will lose out.

These proportions may change, as the regrading on which workers are currently being expected to vote will not even be completed until April 2027. At the moment, around 20 percent have not been regraded at all, meaning that the total of those in detriment could be as high as 31 percent. Among those facing detriment are advice workers, care home workers, advocacy workers, janitors and park attendants.

Rather than calling immediate industrial action across GCC and its ALEOs, all three unions have worked to find means through which the package, on which they have all worked closely for many years, can be implemented. The regrading exercise, whose terms are complex and opaque, appears to be an operation to remove sections of workers who are “in detriment” by encouraging early retirement and job changes.

By allowing “consultative” votes to take place at all, after the largest fire and rehire threats ever made in Britain, the bureaucracy of the three unions is signaling that no struggle will be organised in workers’ defence. Instead, a divide and rule operation is under way. GCC and the unions are encouraging potential “winners” of

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the exercise to vote against colleagues facing loss of pay or being driven out of their jobs.

Unison, aware of the wide hostility to the package among workers, has been obliged to recommend that it is rejected. An FAQ by Glasgow City Unison encourages the Scottish government to find a little more cash to ease the package through. When negotiations started, the "defined period" of pay protection for those in detriment was six months. Unison claims progress has been made in pushing pay cuts back to three years, after which workers will still face a collapse in income.

On social media, Unison's recommendation to reject is couched in the most equivocal language. If workers vote "No", Unison warns, "next steps could involve renewed negotiations with the council, a risk of fire and rehire being threatened again and, ultimately, escalation up to and including industrial action."

Appealing to those in the green circle, Unison enthuses that accepting the deal would "result in a collective agreement" and "would provide a route to the proposed increases, payment of arrears and three year's pay protection". It is not an accident that the vote is being held in the run-up to the winter festivities, when many workers are faced with their largest financial outlays of the year.

The GMB's report on negotiations does not even recommend rejection. Instead, it offered 11 pages of tables to prove that minor improvements had been extracted. The document claimed, for example, that shifting the council from a 10-grade pay model to a 12-grade pay model would "spread any detriment across all earnings levels not just predominantly the lower grade roles."

GMB even claimed, with eye watering cynicism, that "It would have been a betrayal, if, after 7-years of negotiations, members were not consulted and could not vote on the outcome of discussions with your employer."

A "No" vote must become the starting point for uniting council workers against the SNP authority's divide and conquer strategy, aided by the bureaucracy in every union. The demand must be put forward for a genuine pay increase across the board, with no council workers facing detriment.

The ballots are being held under conditions in which GCC, as part of the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership (GHSCP), is pushing through some of the cruelest cuts in social spending. The local authority, like its peers of all political stripes across the UK, is slashing vital services to the most vulnerable.

Currently, six of ten dementia day care centres across the city are being closed to save £2 million. Service users will face distant and overcrowded facilities, with many facing a higher likelihood of requiring care home or hospital admission. Dementia charity Alzheimer Scotland noted that as many as 10,535 people were living with dementia in Glasgow, yet only 396 day care places were currently available before the closures.

The cuts are part of the GHSCP's "Step Forward" programme, which aims to slash social spending by £20 million by next April. It involves reducing welfare rights provision, at the cost of 24 jobs, and merging specialist services for drug users. Scotland retains the highest drugs per capita fatality rate in the whole of Europe.

Opposing local authority pay and job cuts and the ongoing devastation to all forms of essential social services demands a new approach. Nothing can be expected from a trade union apparatus that is dividing, isolating and suppressing workers' struggles.

The resources exist for high-quality, well-paid jobs providing necessary social services to services users of all needs and ages. But these must be forcibly expropriated from a ruling class and its parties waging an assault on social provision while diverting billions to waging war.

Workers in every workplace, school, care organisation, office and private company need new organisations of struggle. These can unite local authority workers, of all unions, with public and private sector workers in the preparation of strikes against the financial oligarchy's monopolisation of the social wealth created by the working class. Contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees today!

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