

British unions try to head off new strike threat at Brighton council

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A ballot of 3,800 members of the Unison trade union employed at Green Party-run Brighton and Hove city council in England ends on September 16.

The ballot for industrial action against the council's attack on pay and allowances was announced last month after the union said 150 of its members "still find themselves in a position of detriment, as a result of the employer's final offer". Among them are part-time environmental officers and cooks in the residential care teams.

Unison branch secretary, Alex Knutsen, said, "During negotiations, both sides strove to reach a fair and equitable solution on a wide range of issues, achieving 90 percent of these objectives...At this point, I cannot rule out industrial action and I call on the council to meet with us to negotiate on these areas to an acceptable conclusion for all parties".

However, Unison made it clear that the ballot was purely "indicative" and another ballot would have to be held if workers "indicated" they supported strike action. The union would not "stop in its efforts to secure improvements for those still in detriment, and, in fact, those discussions are on-going with the employer, at this time, in the context of 'service redesign'".

The "redesign" of council services announced in January has been met with mass opposition from council workers leading to a wildcat strike by refuse collectors and street cleaners in May followed by walkouts by greenkeepers at municipal golf courses.

Opposition to the attacks on public sector pay and conditions rolled out since the financial crisis first erupted was responsible for the Green Party taking control of the council in 2011. At one time, the Labour Party had all three MPs in Brighton and controlled the local council. But by presenting themselves as anti-war progressives and radical critics of Conservative and

Labour budget cuts, Brighton became the venue for the Green's most impressive election wins. Caroline Lucas became the party's first MP there in 2010 and the following year it gained enough seats to form a minority council—the first ever Green-led council in the UK.

However, faced with the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's slashing support to local government—for the 2010-2014 Spending Review period Brighton's grant was cut by approximately one third, or £43 million—the Greens refused even to mount a token resistance. Announcing cuts of £37 million and increases in council tax, council leader and Green Party convenor Jason Kitcat declared, "if councillors do not set a budget then the government will impose one on us. Greens promised to 'resist, to the greatest extent possible, the service cuts and privatisation imposed [on us]' and that is what we will do".

In January 2013, Kitcat announced the redesign of council services—meaning more cuts. He claimed the council had to comply with "Single Status" European legal requirements governing equal pay for men and women. This is a tried and tested method for councils to cut the wage bill—not by increasing the pay of women but by lowering the wages of all workers so they are "equal".

The unions signed a national agreement allowing this to happen. In fact, when the previous Conservative council had threatened the union bureaucracy's privileges by attempting to take the wages of several full-time union officials off the council payroll, Knutsen declared he had saved the council as much as £35 million in the course of more than 3,000 claims for equal pay arising from the Single Status legislation.

The unions expected the redesign process to proceed smoothly. When the refuse workers, opposed to

potential cuts in pay of up to £4,000 per year, launched a powerful wildcat strike and occupation of their workplace in May, the GMB union quickly moved in to sell it out. After sanctioning a week-long official strike, the union carried out a ballot on a “revised offer” from the council. GMB branch secretary, Mark Turner, declared, “The most important thing for the workers to understand is that they will have to do more to keep what they have”. Street sweepers now have to work longer and start earlier and refuse workers have to work most bank holidays. After calling off the strikes, the GMB issued a joint statement with the council promoting the council’s service redesign proposals to be agreed by October.

Nationally, the Green Party has attempted to distance itself from the actions of its local councillors. In a damage limitation exercise, Caroline Lucas visited the picket lines and a number of Green councillors called for Kitcat’s resignation.

Green councillor Ben Duncan declared that Kitcat’s policies had “time and time again betrayed working people, city residents and the electoral interests of the Green Party...”

Duncan produced a long list of the Green Party-led council’s actions: “Whether it’s refusing to rule out cutting pay of unionised staff or evicting council tenants who fall into arrears because the nasty Tories have cut their benefits, championing the erection of a 140m high metal viewing platform on the seafront (committing millions in public money to the project), cosyng up to local privatisers of public services, publicly championing tax-dodging Apple products, bullying and lying to colleagues”.

Nonetheless, Kitcat retains his position despite the criticism and a failed coup by “rebel” Green councillors appealing to the Labour Party to help oust him.

Kitcat now complains of Labour, “At no point did any of them object to the process continuing. Labour are now retrospectively claiming that they did object vociferously, but I never witnessed this. We had understood that none of the parties would vote against the report, though some councillors might abstain”.

The bitter dispute in Brighton has exposed the futility of looking to the Green Party as an alternative to Labour.

For years, the various pseudo-left tendencies—which

share the Green’s promotion of petty-bourgeois, lifestyle politics—have perpetrated the lie that the UK party is more “left wing” than their European counterparts. It was these forces who provided the pro-capitalist policies of the Green’s with a left-sounding cover. Events in Brighton show that the Greens in power in Britain do exactly what the Green Party in Ireland and the rest of Europe have been doing for years—attacking the jobs and livelihoods of workers on behalf of the ruling elite.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on Brighton workers to form Action Committees, independent of the unions, to oppose the attacks on pay and conditions and prevent the dismantling and privatisation of public services. The problem is not a lack of funds or resources, but the monopoly of wealth by the super-rich. This monopoly can only be broken by the formation of a new workers’ party, based on socialist policies, that will lead the fight to bring down the coalition government and replace it by a workers’ government based on socialist policies.



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