

Vote yes and expand the UK local government workers dispute!

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9 October 2024

Hundreds of thousands of local government workers in the UK are being balloted for strike action. Unison members in England and Wales will finish voting on October 16 and Unite members on October 15.

A resounding yes vote would create the best conditions not only to fight for better pay and working conditions, but for a struggle to refund gutted local services which could mobilise the support of the entire working class. That includes, in the first place, other local government workers who have already been led by their trade unions into accepting substandard deals.

Unison, Unite and the GMB leaderships stifle a joint struggle

The Unison, Unite and GMB unions submitted a 2024-25 claim to the National Joint Council (NJC) for Local Government Services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in February. They demanded a pay increase of £3,000 or 10 percent, whichever is greater; a 2-hour reduction in the working week; an additional day of annual leave; a review of ethnic, gender and disability inequalities in pay; and progress towards a minimum rate of £15 an hour in two years' time or sooner.

These conservative demands bore no relation to the losses suffered by local government workers—including librarians, cleaners, refuse and recycling workers, teaching assistants, and social, housing, care and environmental workers—who have lost fully one quarter of their income in real terms since 2010. Suggestive of the brutal workloads which go together with this dire pay is the fact that over 90 percent of local authorities report recruitment and retention problems.

The NJC responded in May with an insulting offer of £1,295 (worth between 2.5 and 5.77 percent) and of “discussions” over equalities pay gaps. Everything else was refused point blank.

At roughly the same time, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) offered a 2.2 percent pay rise from April 1 to September 30, 2024, then 2 percent for the following year. In July, this was revised to a straight 3.2 percent increase for the year from April 1, 2024.

All three unions recommended rejection of COSLA's offer. Unison and Unite also recommended rejection of the NJC offer, with over 80 percent of their members doing so. The GMB made no recommendation on the NJC offer before quickly and quietly claiming that 53 percent of its members had accepted the deal in July, refusing to announce the turnout.

This was only the most open betrayal of a joint struggle of local government workers which could have put the newly elected Labour government immediately on notice that its austerity agenda would be fought tooth-and-nail by the working class. Unite and Unison contributed to the same end with delaying tactics, only announcing a ballot for strike action in late August-early September.

By that time, all three union leaderships had already dealt a heavy blow to workers in Scotland, cancelling joint strike action by refuse workers and street cleaners planned for August 14-22 at the eleventh hour to ballot members on a new pitiful pay deal. COSLA, obviously concerned but knowing the union leaders could be trusted to help lowball workers, offered £1,292 (roughly 3.6 to 5.65 percent).

Unite and the GMB described the offer as a “significant improvement”, pushing for its acceptance while pulling up short of making a formal recommendation, later announcing 71 percent and 78 percent majorities in favour. As with the GMB in England and Wales, they did not report the turnout.

Unison could not do the same. Over half of its 90,000 members in local government in Scotland delivered an 86 percent rejection. The union already had mandates for strike action in around a dozen local councils. With workers making clear that they would not be restrained, the union finally said it would organise a strike ballot of all members.

That it did so without actual intent to fight is shown by the fact that it has announced no timescale for the vote, despite

the rapidly approaching deadline for the same dispute among its members in England and Wales. On Tuesday, school workers in Perth and Kinross were called out on their own for a two-week strike starting October 21.

The local government crisis facing the working class

Local government workers are on the frontline of the austerity crisis jointly authored by the Conservative and Labour Parties. According to a Unison report, *Councils on the Brink*, councils in England, Wales and Scotland face a combined funding shortfall of £4.3 billion in 2025-6, set to grow to £8.5 billion by 2026-7.

Since 2010-11, the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports, council funding has fallen nearly a fifth (18 percent) per person, even as average council tax bills grew by two percent on average over the same period. The falls are sharpest for the poorest communities: 26 percent per person in the most deprived tenth of areas versus 11 percent for the least deprived tenth.

Even this underplays the scale of the cuts, since funding has fallen per person even as needs have increased—driven by a collapsing health service and years of stagnant or falling pay and rising poverty. According to a recent Local Government Association report, “service spending in 2022/23 was 42.1 percent lower than it would have been had service spend moved in line with cost and demand pressures since 2010/11. This means that councils have made £24.5 billion in service cuts and efficiencies over this period.”

The results for working class communities have been catastrophic. Between 2010-23, the Unison report explains, “at least 1,243 council-run youth centres were closed and 1,168 council-run children’s centres were shut. There has also been a significant decline in the number of council-run libraries (1,376 fewer) and public toilets (a drop of 1,629)”.

Eight councils have already declared bankruptcy, opening the way to yet more savage cuts. Among them is Birmingham, the largest local authority in Europe, which is now eliminating 600 jobs, and slashing to the bone funding for social care, children’s and waste collection services. The bankrupt authorities are among 19 English councils given permission this year to take loans and sell assets to pay for essential, day-to-day services.

A way to fight for all local government workers

It is in workers’ power to put a stop to this disaster. A strike in local government would be a powerful focal point for a mobilisation of the whole class against the Starmer Labour government’s agenda of continued austerity, due to be unleashed in full on October 30 with the first budget.

The *World Socialist Web Site* proposes the following programme be taken up in every workplace in the week before ballots close:

- Vote yes! Only determined strike action will get workers the pay and conditions they deserve.
- No worker left behind! Reopen the closed GMB dispute in England and Wales, and the closed Unite and GMB disputes in Scotland; start the Unison strike ballot in Scotland immediately.
- For fully funded local services! Expand the strike’s demands to include first the full restoration and then the above-inflation government increases to council funding necessary to meet all workers’ needs.

Resolutions should be put forward in local branches and union representatives held accountable to their members. But workers will immediately face the pushback of the bureaucracy, and that they will need to be prepared to fightback. This means forming networks of militant workers across the UK and across unions: rank-and-file committees which can rally support for a real fight and see it through.

The WSWs and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will provide every assistance to workers wanting to take up that struggle. Contact us today.



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