

Birmingham bin workers discuss way forward in their fight as strike enters seventh week

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Late Wednesday afternoon, following talks with Birmingham City Council (BCC), Unite announced negotiations will start next week at conciliation service Acas. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham declared, “We could be in touching distance of a deal”.

But on what basis will the Acas talks resolve the workers’ dispute with BCC?

Unite Lead Officer Onay Kasab’s statement underscores that Unite officials are seeking an agreement that would betray the bin workers’ fight. He said, “Unite has put forward clear proposals to solve the dispute that are in line with the council’s needs. We will enter Acas talks in good faith, on the understanding the council will make good on its promise not to let workers lose pay.”

Kasab and Graham were silent on the central issue in the strike: the eradication of the Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) safety-critical role that will destroy the jobs of 150 bin workers and reduce crew sizes.

Birmingham workers must seize the initiative and establish a rank-and-file strike committee to mobilise support from council and waste collection workers across the UK and defeat the efforts of Unite to betray their fight.

A World Socialist Web Site campaign team spoke with striking Birmingham bin workers on Tuesday, as their fight entered its seventh week. They are fighting drastic pay cuts and job destruction by Labour-run Birmingham City Council backed by the Starmer government.

Our reporters distributed the most recent WSWS articles to picketers: “Labour council demands Unite accept surrender deal already rejected by Birmingham bin workers” and “The Birmingham bin workers fight and the lessons of the 2022-3 strike wave.”

Around 50 strikers manned a picket line outside Atlas depot in Tyseley. The council yard is one of three depots, including Perry Barr and Lifford Lane, where 350 refuse collection drivers and loaders, members of the Unite union, have been on indefinite strike since March 11.

They are opposing the elimination of the Grade 3 safety-critical role of WRCO affecting around 150 loaders who

face pay cuts of up to £8,000, reducing crew sizes from four to three.

Workers are resolved to defeat this attack, telling WSWS: “We will see this through to the end, no matter how long it takes!”

On April 14, they voted down by 97 percent a “partial offer” put to them by Unite at the behest of Labour Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner, who demanded an immediate end to the strike. The “improved offer” from BCC upheld the axing of WRCO roles and offered one-off lump sum payments of between £7,000 and £16,000, depending on length of service. But workers rejected this bribe. The offer included pay cuts of up to £8,000 for refuse drivers who have backed the strike in defence of loaders.

Rayner responded to bin workers’ defiance by authorising the use of army planners to co-ordinate a strike breaking operation mounted by BCC since March 31. This has involved the drafting in of agency workers, private contractors and additional support from neighbouring councils. There was no let-up in strike-breaking during the Easter long weekend.

On Tuesday at the Atlas depot, two police cars and a van were parked just down the road, with officers ready to deploy under Section 14 of the Public Order Act (1986). Section 14 has been threatened over the past fortnight to prevent pickets from slow-walking peacefully in front of refuse wagons and to corral strikers behind steel barriers.

Bin workers spoke with disgust toward the Starmer government. “I voted for Labour, I did not expect them to do this. I will not be voting for them again,” said one.

“They are no better than the Tories,” said another striker, “the money keeps trickling upwards and is taken off those who actually do the work.”

Many said the downgrading of their jobs was part of a wider attack, denigrating other key workers such as nurses and teachers and the role they play in providing vital public services.

“We are not Neanderthals, this is a manual job, but it requires experience and knowledge to provide an essential

service for public health,” another worker said.

Other bin workers pointed to £1 million squandered annually on the unelected commissioners brought in by the Conservatives in 2023 and maintained by the Labour government, who are overseeing £300 million worth of cuts in the UK’s second largest city. Strikers said councillors had voted themselves a 5.7 percent pay increase while they were being told to accept a pay cut of up to 25 percent.

Wendy (see video) explained how Birmingham bin workers were not prepared to take a backward step, and were taking a stand on behalf of workers everywhere.

Many picketers expressed hope that a resolution could be found to end the dispute via the resumption of talks between the Labour council and Unite scheduled for Wednesday.

But workers’ uncompromising stance finds no reflection in the position of Unite’s top officials, led by general secretary Sharon Graham. She has appealed to the Starmer government to intervene and oversee talks to agree a “debt restructuring plan” for Birmingham. As the name suggests, any such plan would accept the need for cuts.

While strikers are determined to retain the safety-critical WRCO role, all signs point to a sellout deal in the making as Unite and the Labour council meet behind closed doors.

An article in the *Times* on Friday reported Unite’s negotiating stance during last week’s talks as follows: “Once negotiations restarted on Wednesday, The Times understands Unite turned up with a fresh demand: one-off compensation packages not only for workers who refuse to shift jobs, but also for those who had already agreed to sign up to equivalent roles on the same pay.”

It reported, “A senior Unite source rejected that characterisation. ‘It is untrue to suggest that Unite has moved the goalposts’, they said. ‘Our affected members accepted a while ago that the WRCO role they are in will end. They just want to see their pay protected in new roles or proper compensation.’”

Unite’s background briefing to journalists is a warning to strikers about the rotten deal being cooked up at their expense. The defence of the WRCO role is at the heart of this strike, but Unite is prepared to see its elimination based on enhanced compensation and worthless assurances that those redeployed will see their pay along with that of refuse drivers, protected.

But Labour council leader John Cotton has publicly stated that every role across the local authority workforce is under review, meaning the downgrading of loaders is just the beginning. The scrapping of the role of WRCO would open the floodgates, leaving no worker protected.

Unite officials are not operating under the mandate of the members, but to secure their position as partners of BCC and the Starmer government. This is why they are isolating the

strike, opposing any fight to mobilise broader support from council workers in Birmingham and across the UK.

Such deliberate isolation tactics have blocked any challenge to the strike-breaking operation that has been in full-swing. Workers report that both the GMB and Unison unions have directed their members at the yards to cross their picket lines.

A striker from the Perry Barr depot told WSWS, “Unison has been breaking our strike and sending its members (mainly drivers) across the picket line. The drivers have told us they don’t want to do this but have not been given the choice of a ballot for strike action. They are unhappy as they are faced with the same pay cuts.”

WSWS reporters explained the dispute had entered a critical point, and that to prevent a sellout Birmingham bin workers need to establish a rank-and-file strike committee. This means taking control of negotiations and turning out to other refuse, council and transport workers to close down the strike-breaking operation.

Bin workers must establish complete oversight of negotiations and full scrutiny of any further offers.

The defence of the WRCO role and opposition to reduced refuse crews must be upheld, rejecting the threats of council leaders and the Starmer government. Frontline workers are not responsible for the financial crisis of BCC, or for more than a decade of underfunding by central government.

It is not the jobs and pay of frontline workers which is unaffordable. Society cannot afford the continued funnelling of wealth to the super-rich, including by unelected commissioners in Birmingham and a Labour government centrally who are gutting public services and slashing welfare and the NHS to fund military re-armament and war.



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