

UK, Birmingham City Council workers strike in “Single Status” dispute

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The following was submitted by a reader of the World Socialist Web Site. It concerns Birmingham City Council workers, who struck alongside teachers and civil servants on Thursday, April 24, protesting against the imposition of new pay grades.

It's clear that Birmingham City Council (BCC) and their corporate backers want to use the “Single Status” settlement (governing equal pay for men and women and which means that some male workers will have their pay cut) to make fundamental attacks upon the council workforce and the users of City Council services: the entire Birmingham working class.

Nationally a Single Status framework has been agreed with unions, with local authorities being left to change their pay and grading structures to fit in with this European law, and about half of all UK local authorities have implemented some form of Single Status measures over which there have been disputes, including strike action in other parts of the country. But Birmingham is the largest local authority in Europe and the City Council seem set on blazing a trail through the hard-won pay and terms of employment of their workforce. Further, they plan to use the opportunity to privatise large swathes of council services, ridding themselves of responsibility.

At BCC over the last few years, since the council services was “taken over” by Capita (“the UK’s leading outsourcing company”) there has been a “job evaluation” process, in which every council job has received a points score based on a number of factors: the “Pay and Grading Review” [PGR] is largely based on this “job evaluation” and is how the Council is seeking to implement Single Status.

The Council wants also to introduce mechanisms whereby Council jobs will be “on a par” with the private sector. To this end, the Council has drawn up and issued a new contract for all employees that has not

been agreed with unions, despite the main negotiator in Birmingham UNISON Branch having attended over 250 meetings with the Council over this, and that. The “joint unions” in the Council (UNISON, GMB, TGWU, UCATT, UNITE) have been in dispute with the Council since the contracts were issued in November 2007 for implementation in April 2008, holding a successful one-day strike on February 5.

Crucially, the two elements that constitute the attack are flexibility, and performance-related pay (PRP).

The Council want a totally flexible workforce who will do whatever job is required from whatever location and at a time to suit the employer. The proposals have been watered down somewhat since our strike and the definite threat of another but bigger strike (that took place April 24-25). But one of the things that all local union leaders have said recently is that, even if the Council have to give up the flexibility clauses in negotiations, the flexibility that is “required” shall be implemented via “Business Transformation” anyway!

“Business Transformation” is being increasingly introduced by the Council into its workplaces and is a codification of the marketisation of our jobs and services. PRP obviously ties in well with flexibility, meaning among other things a flexible pay structure. PRP would be likely to mean a weakening of the unions and of the workplace solidarity that exists, because it introduces competition between workers within workplaces as well as within departments, with different workers getting paid different amounts in the same workplace for the same job.

So, where’s the privatisation? In the 1990s with Labour in control of the Council, a campaign based around the Residents’ Action Group for the Elderly (RAGE) and the Birmingham Trades Council defeated attempts to sell off a number of elderly persons’ care homes—outright privatisation. This Council

(Conservative-Liberal Democrat) has sent in the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) to all the homes and other units in at least the elderly, learning disability and mental health services departments (e.g., residential units and day-centre facilities). And these units have all been deemed unfit so they must close. Of course, getting rid of the units doesn't remove the need for care, so the service users are being taken over by the private sector companies who have been vying with one another to provide at least accommodation and care.

The reasons the units can be shut are that they have been systematically underfunded for at least the last 20 years, and they really are quite disgusting places that the service users (some of our most vulnerable people) and the Council workers shouldn't have to endure. And the unions don't appear to be opposed to the closures: as one outraged union rep at one of the units has asked, "What have the unions had to say about this systematic underfunding for the last 20 years? Exactly the same as they have to say now about the closures: nothing!"

For the Council to embark on such a closure programme in a recognised union workplace obviously begs the question of whether the unions have agreed to these closures—the union leaders certainly don't seem to want the issue raised, although it is vital to the current dispute over the new Council contracts.

How should class-conscious workers address these problems of marketisation of our jobs and services being introduced under cover of the Single Status agreement? All the Council unions are united in dispute with the Council over the imposition of the new contracts, which will bring us further into line with the plans of the Council and their backers, so the dispute could be a good start. But so far the unions have only responded to the various attacks of the Council, having no alternative to their plans except (presumably) staying where we are and this is clearly not adequate. Neither is reliance on the "Appeals" (government arbitration) procedure, which the unions did agree to—although apparently a successful appeal may only alter the points' score of a job and a workers' grade cannot be changed by appeal.

The scale of the changes that the Council and their backers want is so huge that the response of the unions must be at least as fundamental. With this in mind, the following resolution should be passed at the maximum

number of trade union and other labour movement bodies and distributed in wider society when it is acted upon:

"This _ _ _ _ believes that UNISON and the joint trade unions cannot mount an effective defence of the interests of Birmingham City Council workers without an alternative plan for BCC jobs and services: the plans of the Council and their backers (primarily Capita) go far beyond the attack upon the wages and conditions of Council workers evident in their latest offer over the implementation of the PGR pay and grading review, and are aimed at the marketisation and privatisation of Council jobs and services.

"The only effective reply to this is for the unions to make proposals that will dramatically improve council jobs and services rather than having nothing to say whilst the private sector has its way, effectively unopposed.

"This _ _ _ _ demands that the joint union negotiating team resist all attempts at worsening, or at marketising, any jobs and services using industrial action including strike action, and that the joint unions along with the wider labour movement and organised bodies of service users and families make urgent efforts to draw up a plan of council jobs and services which is based on the needs of the service users and of council employees."

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