

British unions isolate refuse workers fighting wage cuts

By Paul Stuart
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In collaboration with Green Party-run Brighton & Hove council, the GMB trade union called off a five-day strike due to start on June 24 by hundreds of Cityclean refuse workers and street cleaners. Prior to the GMB calling off the latest scheduled strike, the workers had ended a five-day stoppage on June 21.

The dispute began when Green Party council leader Jason Kitcat sent out letters informing workers that their wages and allowances were to be slashed by up to £4,000. The letter initiated the 90-day consultation procedure required by law when cuts to jobs wages and services are made. In response, on May 8, workers walked out on unofficial strike action, occupying part of the Hollingdean Cityclean depot to defend their wages and allowances.

The GMB immediately intervened to end the unofficial action. By doing so, the union demonstrated their indispensability to the council, bringing the strikes under control in order to impose a version of the councils' demands.

The refuse workers were then forced to work alongside agency workers clearing up uncollected rubbish piled up around the city. Earlier, the GMB had described the same agency workers as a scab force hired by the Greens to break the strike.

According to the union, the council's measures will lead to a cut in wages of between £25 and £95 a week. These cuts would leave many council workers, already very low paid, unable to pay their bills and mortgages.

This is only the latest in a series of attacks on workers in Brighton by the Green minority council. In February 2012, the council adopted a cuts budget with all but one Green councillor voting in favour. One council official said over the next three years £20 million in cuts would be imposed on already run down services.

After calling off the strikes, the GMB issued a joint statement with the council promoting a "service redesign proposal" from the council. Neither the GMB nor the council are explaining its content. Despite being part way through the 90-day consultation process, the council are working with the GMB for an "October implementation" date.

GMB branch secretary Mark Turner said the new offer "significantly reduces" wage losses but does not remove the assault on wages demanded by workers. As he acknowledged, the new offer would only eliminate the losses previously proposed "in some cases."

A ballot will take place over the next 28 days on the proposed new offer negotiated in private by the GMB and council. In their haste to close down the struggle, Turner said there remain "some areas that must be addressed". The union is to continue discussing these unspecified areas with the council whilst the ballot process is underway.

Turner explained, "For their part, the council have committed to confirm to each staff member how the revised proposal will affect them on an individual basis." This is calculated to further isolate those workers who will lose most from the rest of the workforce.

Following the unofficial walkout, Green council chief executive Penny Thompson went to speak to workers to explain an "affordable" deal. In response workers tore up the letters from Kitcat and denounced the council.

Workers then marched on the council offices and handed back their letters. GMB officials spent the next 48 hours forcing workers to abide by anti-trade union laws and called off the unofficial strike. This meant subordinating the workers to an official ballot that effectively demobilised them until June 7, when a

further seven days for notification before strike action could begin. The workers voted 96 percent in favour of strike action.

On May 10 the GMB said, “The decision to ballot follows months of fruitless negotiation with council officers following a decision by the Green Party leader of the council, Jason Kitcat, to delegate responsibility for implementing the cuts to council officers.”

The GMB was mainly concerned that the Green council was bypassing them by giving the job of imposing cuts to lower ranking officials, rather than in collaboration with the trade unions.

The union used the strike ballot period to re-enter private negotiations with the council. These delays, the result of anti-trade union legislation the unions have not lifted a finger to oppose, provided the Green council ample time to prepare what GMB’s Rob Macey described as “a full blown strike busting operation,” involving refuse vehicles manned by agency workers and moves to recruit more agency workers.

These measures were greeted with widespread opposition, and Kitcat was forced to issue a statement that the council would not illegally use agency staff to break the strike.

The GMB, a union with massive resources and a national membership of over 620,000, limited the strike ballot to the Cityclean department, refusing to ballot the 8,000 strong council workforce. Instead it turned workers away from mobilising widespread industrial support in the working class, toward a campaign of pressuring sections of the Green Party. GMB senior organiser Charles Harrity said Kitcat’s actions had “brought his party into disrepute.”

This was just as senior Green officials were desperately mounting a rearguard action to defend their shattered reputation. In a damage limitation exercise a number of Green councillors issued a letter protesting the council leaders’ decision to attack low-paid workers’ wages and called for his resignation.

What was described by the GMB as a rebellion within the Green Party fizzled into nothing. At a Green Party annual council meeting, at the end of May, Kitcat retained his position as convenor of Green Party councillors and leader of the council.

Once the GMB had brought the wildcat action to an end and enforced their stranglehold, Caroline Lucas,

the Green Member of Parliament for Brighton Pavilion, and some Green councillors felt emboldened enough to visit the picket lines during the first official strike that began June 14.

Collaboration between the GMB and Green councillors intensified. On June 17, the council’s chief executive Penny Thompson said, “I really appreciate the constructive approach of GMB and we will work hard tomorrow to work towards a settlement and bring the strike to an end.”

Kitcat tried to justify the attack on Cityclean workers wages by claiming it was to establish equal pay between the sexes. This is a tried and tested method by councils to cut the wage bill—not by increasing the pay of women but by lowering the wages of all workers to the same level. This was the argument used against refuse workers strikes in Leeds in 2009.

Kitcat declared wage cuts were “long overdue” and that previous Labour and Conservative administrations had “made a number of abortive attempts to resolve what the unions themselves have called a ‘mish-mash’ of allowances which all agreed need resolving”. He added, “Of the council’s £180 million a year pay bill, these allowances make up £4million.”

Brighton & Hove City Council is the first local authority in the UK to be run by the Green Party. The city’s MP, Lucas, is the Green’s first and only MP. They formed a minority council in 2011, winning support by presenting themselves as anti-war progressives, defenders of democratic rights and opponents of austerity measures. The bitter dispute in Brighton demonstrates 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.

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