

UK: South Yorkshire cleaning workers continue strike

By Barry Mason
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Three cleaning workers, employed at a school in the village of Kinsley near Wakefield, England, remain on strike in a dispute over pay. They have been on strike since the beginning of September.

The women, Lesley Leak, Marice Hall and Karen McGee, have a total of 30 years' service at the primary school. Wakefield District Council had run the school, but last year it became an academy and is now run by the Wakefield City Academy Trust, which controls over 20 schools, mainly in West and South Yorkshire.

In April this year, the academy contracted out the cleaning of the school to the Barnsley-based C&D Cleaning Group. C&D was founded by two former window cleaners in 1995 and sells itself as a "cost effective quality cleaning contractor."

C&D cleaning is refusing to adhere to TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment) regulations, which normally cover contracts being transferred from public sector to private sector employment, protecting pay and conditions for a limited period. The company denies it has changed their terms and conditions.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the workers involved. Marice said, "We used to work for Wakefield council, but on April 4 we got transferred to a company, C&D cleaning, based in Barnsley. We were told our terms and conditions would be transferred across and would be the same apart from the date of being paid.

"But when we got April's wage we had been paid £6.70, instead of £7.85 an hour. We rang up the company and they thought we were under 25 (and so not entitled to the adult minimum wage figure of £7.20 an hour). In the May pay packet, the company rectified it but paid us £7.20 an hour (the adult minimum wage).

"We confronted them and contacted them on the

phone and told them that we had been transferred over and should be paid £7.85 an hour. Also they are not paying the hours we work, which is 59.7 hours a month. They have only been paying us for 47 to 52 hours a month."

Marice explained, "In July I was down £119. We just want what is ours; we have had these wages (£7.85 an hour) for years. We can't go on being treated like this, we are the innocent party, and we are hard working."

The cut in their rate of pay combined with the fact that they are not being paid their full hours means the workers have effectively had a 25 percent cut in their pay. As well as losing pay, they have had their leave, sick leave and pension entitlements reduced.

Faced with the attack on their pay and conditions the women contacted their trade union, Unison, for support. Unison in turn contacted C&D and, according to a report in the October 9 *Guardian*, the union was told by Nick Thorpe, head of human resources at C&D, "We do not recognise you or your organization and subsequently we will not be entering into any form of dialogue with you in relation to our employees."

He added, "I understand ... the impact for you as an organisation when members realise that we are no longer living in the 1980s and they question the actual value of union membership when you have no say, power or influence over their employer."

Faced with the intransigence of their employer, at the beginning of September the women decided to walk off the job and mount a picket line at the school.

C&D Cleaning Group advertised for cleaners in order to break the strike and the picket line is being broken by scab cleaners. On the first day of the strike, which was an inset day (the school was open, but no children attended), the picket line was honoured by 18 colleagues, including teaching assistants. They were

subsequently told by the head teacher they would be breaking their contract if they did not go in.

Talks held under the auspices of the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service failed to resolve the dispute. With the company refusing to enter into dialogue, Unison announced it would take the case to an employment tribunal. C&D has referred the matter to its legal representatives.

On October 15, a march and rally was held in Barnsley, where the cleaning company is based. It attracted around 100 supporters, including delegations from Hull and Leeds trades' councils. After a short march, a rally was held in the centre of Barnsley.

The organisers of the rally were high-ranking members of the labour and trade union bureaucracy. They had nothing to offer the striking workers, except a bankrupt perspective of them standing on a picket line for an indefinite period until a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government rides to their rescue.

Among the speakers was Robin Symonds, a full-time organiser for Unison and a member of the Corbyn-supporting Labour Representation Committee. Seeking to utilise the principled struggle of the women as a means of reviving illusions in the moribund trade unions, he said, "These are a beacon of hope for the trade union movement. ... I have no doubt whatsoever that the Kinsley three will win. How could they not win with the support of the trade union movement behind them?"

Tosh McDonald, president of the train drivers union ASLEF, a member of the Labour Party and a supporter of Corbyn, told the rally, "This movement of ours can support three women as long as it takes, if it takes until we get a Corbyn-led government ... to take away the riches that these people (C&D) earn ... we as a movement will sustain you. ... This is a battle we will win."

Jane Aitchison, president of Leeds Trades Union Congress, a rep for the Public and Commercial Services union and joint national secretary of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party-backed Unite the Resistance, added, "We could support three women with our movement for a bloody long time ... we support these women for as long as it takes by any means necessary."

The reality is that the unions have betrayed every major struggle of the working class over the last three

decades, in collaboration with successive Labour and Conservative governments. Left in the clutches of the trade union bureaucracy, the Kinsley workers, despite their determined struggle, face isolation and defeat.

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