

UK: Refuse workers resume strike after Birmingham Council imposes redundancies

By John Farmer and Robert Stevens
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Labour Party-run Birmingham City Council has issued redundancy notices to 113 workers after renegeing on an agreement that ended a long-running strike on August 16.

On August 31, the council cancelled a meeting of its leadership, set to be held the next day, that was to discuss an agreement it previously reached with the Unite trade union aimed at resolving the dispute. Instead, it announced it would continue with its redundancy plan.

Following this, refuse workers immediately resumed industrial action. Unite stated it would re-open a ballot for further strikes, which could “mean industrial action and dirty streets extending until 2018.”

The seven-week strike began on June 30 and resulted in mountains of waste piling up on streets. Unite called the action after talks failed, saying the council’s restructuring plans threatened the jobs of more than 120 staff, with many supervisor roles going, to be replaced by staff on lower pay grades.

The council claimed its plans would modernise the service and save £5 million (US\$6.5 million) a year. In the last six years, it has already reduced spending on waste management by £6 million (US\$7.8 million). The strategic director responsible for refuse collection, Jacqui Kennedy, said, “failing to improve productivity and efficiency is not an option.”

The workers targeted for removal are paid just over £20,000 (US\$26,154) a year and lead three-men teams responsible for the secure function of the refuse collection and for monitoring its vehicles safely

Refuse workers are generally low-paid, and most of those working on emptying bins get near or the minimum wage of £7.50 (US\$9.29) per hour. Some jobs are advertised as low as £7.10 an hour.

The council is further demanding that refuse shifts go

from four days working to five.

The proposed new shifts mean that a working day will go from four 9.15-hour shifts a week to five-day shifts of just over 7 hours. For some refuse collectors, this takes away the possibility of boosting a poor pay packet by working the fifth day as overtime. For Grade 3 supervisors, who are responsible for safety at the back of refuse vehicles, it reduces their wages by between £3,000 and £5,000 a year.

Throughout the strike Unite never called all-out action. Starting June 30 and running through July 3, 11, 19 and 27 and August 4, a stoppage was held for two hours in each nine-hour day. From July 28, with the council still refusing to relent on its demands, Unite stepped up the frequency of the strikes—but only from two-hour to three-hour stoppages. Workers also carried out an overtime ban and returned to depots for all lunch and tea breaks.

Even this partial action soon resulted in rubbish piling up all over what is the UK’s second largest city, with a population of more than 1 million. In response, the Labour-run council mounted a scabbing operation by bringing in contractors—at a cost of £40,000 a day—to provide trucks and agency workers in an attempt to break the strike. The scab force consisted of 52 lorries comprising three men in each team.

Supervised by the government’s ACAS arbitration service, Unite eventually agreed to a sell-out deal under which the council “provisionally” agreed that “certain posts” would not be made redundant. In exchange, Unite would propose its members accept the new five-day rota system.

Agreeing to call off the action, Unite Assistant General Secretary Howard Beckett said, “I would like to pay tribute to the city council leader Councillor John Clancy who has worked very hard and travelled the

extra mile to achieve this solution. ...”

Reneging on the deal and imposing the redundancies, Clancy claimed that maintaining the positions of Grade 3 workers would be illegal, potentially opening up the council for equal pay claims. The council said the redundancy notices were issued “in order to protect its legal and financial position”.

Unite claims there are no such equal pay considerations. In July, a union representative said, “This was all sorted out years ago after the last strike. Our lawyers and council lawyers confirmed the structure agreed in 2011 was equal pay compliant.”

Responsible for the legal advice given to Clancy was Stella Manzie, the council’s newly appointed CEO. This is bound up with Birmingham Council escalating its plans to remove 2,200 positions, saving £40 million within two years. In line with this, the council ditched its previous CEO and took on one who has track record for city council cuts.

Manzie was appointed by Clancy with the approval of the leaders of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat opposition. Manzie is to be paid £180,000 a year. She is a well-trusted functionary of the ruling elite with several council clean-ups under her belt. She became CEO at Rotherham Council amid the child sex scandal and advanced her reputation when she reduced Coventry City Council spending by 25 percent.

Clancy welcomed Manzie to her position, saying, “This is a crucial appointment and I am delighted with the progress we have made. Stella Manzie has a long and successful record of achievement at the top of local and national government.”

By the end of 2016, the Labourites in Birmingham had already faithfully pushed through—as demanded by central government—£650 million in cuts since the beginning of mass austerity nationally in 2010. In 2017/2018, an estimated £113 million in further cuts is to be imposed. By 2018, the council will have reduced its workforce by fully 13,000. In 2010, it employed 20,000 workers. By 2016, this had fallen to 12,400, and by 2018, the council aims to employ just 7,000 staff.

These cuts are fully in line with the policies of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who despite his anti-austerity rhetoric, has demanded that all Labour councils set balanced budgets—i.e., impose cuts—or face disciplinary action.

Unite is doing everything possible to end the dispute,

with its statement on September 1 as the strike resumed reading, “Unite members do not want to strike but they are being forced down this route by the council’s destructive actions.

“Once again Unite appeals to the council to come to its senses. Respect the ACAS agreement and do the right thing by the workers and residents of Birmingham.”

Yet again, Unite, as with all the unions, is complying with anti-strike laws brought in by previous Conservative governments and maintained by Labour when it was in office. Its statement continued, “Anti-trade union laws require unions to conduct a further ballot of the members concerned should there be failure to reach a settlement within the 12 weeks following the initial strike ballot. The new ballot will open on Friday 8 September, concluding on Monday 18 September.”

The council said it would take part in talks with “trades unions through ACAS in parallel with seeking alternative jobs for the Grade 3s affected by redundancy”.

With talks set to go ahead, ACAS issued a statement to the city’s Members of Parliament stating, “All parties have confirmed that they remain committed to finding a resolution which recognises the interests of the employees, the financial problems facing Birmingham City Council, the need for a lawful payments system and the legitimate expectations of the people of Birmingham to receive a better service and clean streets.”

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