

Coventry bin strike:

Lessons from an unnecessary rank & file defeat

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This article should have been in PCBI but I needed more discussions with activists from the bin strike (some of whom have taken voluntary redundancy) and with rank and file drivers to confirm this analysis.

The (almost) 7 month bin strike in Coventry put all variations of labour movement politics to the test. This article will try and analyse this. First some facts about the strike and its resolution.

The strike ended with all disciplinary sanctions against deputy-convenor Pete Randle being removed with “no case to answer” and with Unite claiming a 12.9% pay rise¹ for all the HGV2 drivers. This rise was not the upgrading that the drivers demanded but was financially similar. It was an agreement that for in principle agreeing to work weekends all the drivers would receive an increase on the salaries, which averaged out at 12.9%.

The “in principle” was understood by the Unite officials (and presented to the members as such) as being entirely voluntary in practice, everyone could say they weren’t available. i.e. presented as a mechanism to allow the council to claim it hadn’t conceded the union’s claim, whilst in monetary terms the members would get the rise they wanted. In addition the council asked for and got voluntary redundancies (VR) from the council workforce, which the agreement accepted resulted from the dispute.²

The council currently is:-

- 1) ignoring the union’s interpretation of the agreement
- 2) Paying the 12.9% but not on the hourly rate as agreed (so no knock on effect for overtime or pensions)
- 3) insisting that drivers have to work weekends to qualify for this money (and if they don’t then the 12.9% will be withdrawn in January)
- 4) excluding the HGV2 drivers who do the winter gritting from the 12.9% as legally they cannot work all the required weekends

The depot which previously had one full time convenor and one full time deputy convenor now has only two reps, none of them full time. The union branch leadership is no longer in the hands of the drivers. The drivers’ candidate lost to an existing full time rep who supports the council’s interpretation of the agreement.

Those drivers who took VR but are still members of the same union branch were advised that they could not attend their own branch meeting to vote in these elections.

Four of the six strong strike committee including both the convenor and deputy convenor took VR. Three of the four who took VR said that part of the reason for leaving was that they feared the employer would seek to attack them at a later date.

None of this looks like a victory does it? Remaining drivers have asked “We were promised a return to work strategy by Unite, where is it?”, of the settlement agreement “this has so many holes in it, if it was a ship it’d sink” whilst one driver said to a comrade “It was a waste of time. Most of the union people have left us and it was 7 months for nothing”.

The drivers’ reps have escalated all these issues to the Unite national officer³ who is insistent on the original understanding. The remaining local reps are waiting for his action to back up this insistence. So it may still be in the balance.

The basic lesson of the dispute is that no matter how much effort and hard work the best of the bureaucracy put into a dispute, if that effort is not used to empower, involve and increase the workplace activity of the rank and file then any so-called victory is built on thin ice. This lesson is as old as trade unionism.

Any experienced trade unionist knows that the successful implementation of any collective bargaining agreement is ultimately dependent upon the strength of workplace organisation.

SWP members have built workplace trade unionism by pushing within the workplace to implement agreements already signed off but deliberately ignored by local management.

The question for our party and the class is how to apply that lesson in practice to the Coventry bin dispute and others taking place now e.g. CWU, RMT, etc. So let's analyse the politics of the labour movement re the dispute.

Coventry Labour Council

The Labour Party had a massive majority in Coventry, holding 39 of 54 council seats.⁴ it was under no pressure from the Tories, and still isn't.

When the bin drivers submitted their claim for regrading the labour council's original response was to state that if they needed more money then they should work more hours.

In March 2020 the Council fully bought Tom White Waste (TWW), having been involved with this company since 2009. This company managed "skip" waste and its functions initially were complementary but not competitive to the council's own functions. But the council would use TWW as a major scabbing operation during the dispute.

The council employed agency drivers on rates of pay well above the union's claim for the HGV drivers and agency collectors on well above the council's rate as direct scabs on the strike.

By March 2022 Unite estimated that the employment of these agency staff cost the council just under ten times more than it would have cost to settle the unions claim in full. By the time the dispute ended this figure must have doubled.

TWW permanent drivers continued their normal work which was not scabbing on the dispute. In March 2022 the council awarded the TWW permanent drivers a 12% wage increase (whilst denying the necessity to do the same to its own drivers!). This came to light when a local employer sympathetic to Unite published the letter they received as a customer from TWW which stated "drivers wages have increased by 12%".

The Council lied claiming that HGV drivers were earning £52,000 a year in an attempt to create division between Coventry citizens and the strikers. Given that the actual pay scales for HGV2 drivers start at £22,183 and end at £27,741 it was and is legally impossible for an HGV driver to earn anything like this money because of restrictions on the number of hours that a driver can work. (see point 4 above.)

This was union-busting and nothing less. Be clear – this is what a Labour government will mean in a similar situation.

The Labour left

The LP left individually supported the strike. The biggest Unite branch in Coventry, whose secretary is part of Coventry MP Zara Sultana's team, consistently voted large sums to the bin strikers' fund. LP members in that branch voted to support these donations. Zara Sultana did visit the picket line, but only once in 7 months. She never spoke out in support of the bin strikers in the way she did in support of the RMT and CWU.

Some LP left members accepted that her support for the bin strikers was "less than ideal" but that she needed to do this to avoid Corbyn's fate.

Yet Zara is one of the leading lights of the enough is enough campaign.⁵ Backing down to a labour council when the general secretary of Britain's biggest private sector union is publicly calling that council out and suspending labour councillors from Unite membership hardly shows great resilience in the face of pressure.

Zara is a socialist. The LP members said we'd put principle before tactics and "that's why you're in the SWP". We put the principle that the class struggle at work is the fundamental agency of change and winning that struggle supersedes tactical issues about who wins what on various institutions of the labour movement, including which LP person represents us in Parliament.

Unite regional bureaucracy

The Unite regional bureaucracy advised the strikers against effective picketing – "we were told not to stop every vehicle going in and out of our depot".

When the deputy convenor organised the strikers into an impromptu march to the city council early in the dispute the then regional officer panicked that this would be "secondary action". The region just sent out

email messages to branches asking for donations to their strike fund, whilst SWP members were on the phone ringing Unite activists to raise financial solidarity. Strikers tell us that the regional secretary visited the picket line twice, yet this was the longest running dispute in the region.

We argued “There are a host of Unite regional sector meetings to take place in April, May and June. Unite could organise these in the Coventry office and organise delegates to visit the picket line.” It never happened.

The region seemed more embarrassed by the conflict with the LP than with making sure the bin strikers won. At the March Unite rally the Unite West Midlands regional secretary publicly disagreed with Graham’s attacks on the LP. Given what is happening now in the branch and with the regional official backing the council’s interpretation of the agreement, it seems likely that the pro-LP officialdom will use the failure of the dispute to attack Graham’s leadership of Unite.

Unite national organising department

Unite nationally threw stacks of resources into this dispute. They wanted to win it, worked hard to win it and were completely unphased by the fallout with Labour.

Unite organisers were involved in picketing TWW, in the leverage campaigns outside TWW customers (both with help from SWP members) and with an enormous effort going door to door round Coventry campaigning against Coventry Labour Council’s behaviour. They did this not as Unite but under the guise of a local campaign group, Coventry Confidential.⁶ This did result in two thirds of Coventry residents saying the union’s claim was “reasonable”.⁷ But public opinion has never won a single strike. If it did nurses and MPs pay would switch.

Those organisers should instead have been going round Unite workplaces in the West Midlands arguing for financial solidarity and calling on members to support the picket lines. As we argued before the elections:-

“The emphasis on leafletting councillors’ constituencies is electoralism – it might embarrass the councillors but no more... Talk of punishing the council in the May elections is pie in the sky.” TUSC stood candidates in 11 council wards and achieved the following share of the votes: 2%, 1%, 2%, less than 1%, 3%, 4%, 4%, 9% (Dave Nellist in the ward where he was once councillor), 3%, 2%, 1%.⁸ The LP didn’t lose a single seat.

Unite hid its role in the picketing at TWW and in the leverage campaign for fear of the law. We had the situation where SWP members in Coventry could support the TWW picketing but Unite Coventry bin strikers could not. As one driver put it to us “how come you can protest outside the scabbing but I cannot?” This combination of substitutionism i.e. the organising department will win this strike for you, and reliance on public opinion had the effect of demobilising the strikers.

And the Unite local government combine was not asked to provide physical support on the bin strikers’ picket line.

The SWP

The industrial department were excellent. Leaflets written, modified and produced on demand. Comrades in Unite and other unions (e.g. NEU) won solidarity donations for the strikers and visited the picket line.

In total 17 Coventry comrades visited the bin strike picket line. The party’s presence at the Unite rally in March⁹ was excellent. Two of our comrades spoke from the platform, comrades from the Midlands attended and our gazebo, papers and placards were prominent throughout.

Politically we argued to extend the strike to TWW drivers and to the collectors, to involve other Unite activists officially in picketing. We pointed out that

“Secondary picketing is not a criminal offence. It is a civil offence. Which means the employer will have to take out an injunction... Only after and if that injunction has been issued will the union risk paying fines if its members continue to picket TWW’s depot... The point is that the union should push up against the limits of the law rather than self-policing.

“The union should use this dispute as an opportunity to win these drivers (i.e. TWW) to trade unionism... They too will be irritated by the fact that the agency drivers are on a much higher rate than

the permanent Tom Whites drivers. Let's get rank and file Unite drivers talking to rank and file drivers at Tom Whites."

Whilst we were picketing the TWW depot used for scabbing, TWW drivers from the "skip" depot drove passed us. Two drivers stopped to say that "we should be out with you" and others drove past with a thumbs up sign. Unfortunately the union didn't act on this. But the employer did. Hence the 12% rise to the TWW "skip" drivers.

"Unite collectors must not work with Tom White Waste drivers. An industrial action ballot for a rise to equal the rates being advertised for Tom White would be a start."

The union kept holding meetings with the collectors but never seemed confident to call a ballot. We argued "Unite should call and then build for a solidarity day on the Whitey and TWW picket lines for trade unionists to come to the picket line and show their support. This would help boost the confidence of the collectors if they ballot and of the TWW skip drivers to join the union. But it has to be built properly, which means officials getting on the phones and persuading Unite reps & officials to attend." This never happened.

Over time the division between the collectors and the drivers increased. When we drafted a leaflet for Unite to put into the collectors we were told not to do so.

Questions for us

Were we right to actively participate in the Unite substitutionist campaigns? We thought yes, as to refuse to do so would be to abstain.

We never openly argued for unofficial action because to do so puts the emphasis on the confidence of the rank and file rather than on the union to build that confidence. Were we right to do this? The closest we came to it was when our leaflet quoted a letter from a Unite activist which appeared in Socialist Worker about the unofficial walkout by Altrad workers at Ineos near Hull¹⁰ which ended, "a final point. Nobody was jailed, nobody was fined, nobody lost their job because of the walkout. Union laws? Nah."

We never said that Unite's strategy would fail. Because to people on strike arguing that the current strategy will lose will look defeatist and risk lowering morale. Also the union, including members of the strike committee, genuinely thought they were winning (till very recently they thought they had won). Instead we argued that our strategy would win more, and quicker. Should we have been harder on Unite's strategy? There's no doubt the suspension of the deputy convenor had an intimidating effect on the rank and file and left them feeling more dependent on the bureaucracy.

The same seems to be happening in the CWU dispute with the suspension of reps. In hindsight I think in the CWU dispute, especially given the history of unofficial walkouts, the suspensions should have been met by immediate unofficial walkouts and flying pickets to spread the dispute. It may be too late to argue this now but it's a lesson for the future.

Addendum

The council have requested a meeting with the two Bin Drivers reps. The fact that the council have requested it suggests that it wants to get the drivers on board and may be concerned by a further fall out with Unite. It will definitely not want to risk another drivers' ballot. It's also credit to the resilience of the remaining drivers' reps who have never wavered on their confident insistence that the council's interpretation of the agreement is completely wrong.

1 Six month continuous strike action ends in victory for Coventry bin drivers (unitetheunion.org).

2 Agreement to end the Unite trade dispute with Coventry City Council on behalf of grade 5 HGV drivers. We only saw this agreement in the last two weeks.

3 Onay Kasab.

4 Coventry City Council (local) election results 5 May 2022.

5 Enough is enough a campaign to fight the cost of living crisis (wesayenough.co.uk).

6 Coventry confidential (covconfidential.com).

7 Poll shows two-thirds think Coventry bin strike pay demands are 'reasonable' Coventrylive (Coventrytelegraph.net).

8 Coventry city council (local) election results 5 May 2022 – Coventry city council.

9 Back Coventry's Bin Workers | Act Now – Support the Strike (unitetheunion.org).

10 Socialist Worker, 12 May.