# Birmingham bin strike enters 11th week amid rising public health fears and financial strain



Birmingham City Council is currently grappling with a significant waste management crisis, exacerbated by an ongoing strike initiated by bin workers on 11 March. This industrial action stems from a dispute over proposed pay cuts that the trade union Unite claims could cost workers up to £8,000 annually. Despite the council's assertion that it is re-grading roles to prevent equal pay disputes, frustrations have boiled over as rubbish accumulates in the streets, impacting residents and local businesses profoundly.

The strike has now entered its eleventh week, with a spokesperson from the council noting that only a handful of waste trucks have successfully left depots in recent days, primarily to address waste deemed a fire hazard at high-rise flats. The operational limits placed by picket lines have significant implications, with reports indicating that roughly one vehicle is able to depart per hour, leaving around 17,000 tonnes of waste uncollected. Birmingham’s rubbish problems are not just an inconvenience; they are raising serious public health concerns, including reports of a norovirus outbreak in care homes attributed to deteriorating sanitary conditions.

In light of mounting rubbish and health risks, the council previously declared a major incident in March. This decision was prompted by rapidly escalating rubbish levels across the city and led to police powers being invoked to facilitate the departure of waste vehicles from depots. However, a spokesperson for West Midlands Police has stated that the threshold for ongoing intervention is no longer met, although a police presence continues to be maintained at various depots.

Amid this backdrop, the council is trying to navigate its significant financial difficulties, including a historic liability for equal pay settlements which has left it with a strained budget. Over the past two decades, Birmingham City Council has paid out over £1 billion to settle equal pay claims, and in 2023, it faced an effective bankruptcy due to spiralling costs from a software contract. The financial pressures have hindered efforts to invest in modernisation initiatives, such as upgrading waste collection fleets and enhancing recycling processes. Although the council has attempted to offer self-service waste disposal trucks and encouraged businesses to opt for private waste collection, these measures have fallen short of resolving the ongoing crisis.

The union has been critical of the council’s handling of the situation, with Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham emphasising the unfairness of pay cuts and job downgrades for workers responsible for essential waste collection roles. The local population has expressed frustration as rubbish piles become an eyesore, while service cutbacks have been imposed even as council tax has risen.

As negotiations between the council and Unite continue, the prospect of a resolution appears uncertain. Union members recently rejected a council proposal, citing it as inadequate in addressing their financial concerns. Birmingham City Council maintains that it is committed to finding a workable compromise, one that respects the financial constraints it faces while addressing the legitimate grievances of its workers.

The impact of this strike goes beyond Birmingham, highlighting broader issues regarding workers' rights and fair remuneration in the face of financial strain. As the city works to restore normalcy to its waste management services, both sides remain at an impasse, with the health of residents and the work conditions of bin workers hanging in the balance.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq698rm2p3vo), [[3]](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/1553/birmingham_city_council_declares_major_incident)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/25e6a8c0-0eff-4655-a22f-1ee94fca80c8), [[5]](https://news.sky.com/story/birmingham-bin-strike-to-continue-after-union-rejects-councils-offer-13348716)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq698rm2p3vo), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c205z19rn52o), [[6]](https://www.wastemanaged.co.uk/our-news/business-waste/birmingham-council-bin-strike-update/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq698rm2p3vo), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/25e6a8c0-0eff-4655-a22f-1ee94fca80c8), [[3]](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/1553/birmingham_city_council_declares_major_incident), [[4]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c205z19rn52o)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://news.sky.com/story/birmingham-bin-strike-to-continue-after-union-rejects-councils-offer-13348716), [[7]](https://resource.co/article/council-approves-agreement-end-birmingham-bin-strike-13138)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq698rm2p3vo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/25e6a8c0-0eff-4655-a22f-1ee94fca80c8> - Birmingham is grappling with severe waste management issues due to an indefinite strike by bin workers, initiated over disputes concerning pay and job downgrades. The strike has led to significant piles of uncollected rubbish across the city, impacting local businesses and residents. The city's financial struggles are rooted in a historic equal pay settlement and an expensive software contract. Efforts to modernize, including fleet upgrades and recycling improvements, are hindered by financial constraints. The council has introduced self-service waste disposal trucks and urged businesses to consider private waste collection. The situation has drawn criticism from multiple political parties and has resulted in service cutbacks amid increased council tax. The union's industrial action has highlighted broader issues of fair wages and workers' rights, with national implications for employment policies. The ongoing strike has also contributed to deteriorating sanitary conditions, leading to health concerns like a norovirus outbreak in care homes.
3. <https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/1553/birmingham_city_council_declares_major_incident> - In response to the ongoing waste service industrial action, Birmingham City Council declared a major incident on 31 March 2025. The council's contingency plan aimed to collect waste from all properties once a week, but actions on the picket line have hindered this effort. Daily blocking of depots by pickets has limited vehicle departures to approximately one per hour, resulting in around 17,000 tonnes of uncollected waste across the city. This situation has raised concerns about public health risks and environmental damage. The council is working on an emergency plan to address the backlog and mitigate the impact of the industrial action.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c205z19rn52o> - More than 350 bin workers in Birmingham voted to strike over what the union described as an attack on pay and working conditions. The dispute centers on Birmingham City Council's decision to downgrade approximately 170 roles, potentially costing affected staff an average of £8,000 annually. The strike follows a breakdown in talks between the union and the council. Birmingham City Council stated its commitment to minimizing disruption to residents. Unite general secretary Sharon Graham criticized the council's refusal to delay implementing plans to remove Waste Recycling and Collection Officer (WRCO) roles, which are designed to ensure health and safety requirements are met.
5. <https://news.sky.com/story/birmingham-bin-strike-to-continue-after-union-rejects-councils-offer-13348716> - The long-running strike by bin workers in Birmingham will continue after union members overwhelmingly rejected the city council's offer in a fresh ballot. The industrial action, initiated on 11 March as part of a dispute over pay, has resulted in thousands of tonnes of rubbish remaining uncollected and warnings of a public health emergency. Hundreds of workers have been on all-out strike for a month, with residents complaining about significant waste accumulation. The union rejected the council's offer, citing substantial pay cuts for workers and unresolved issues regarding pay cuts for 200 drivers. The council disputes the union's claims and urges a return to talks to reach a fair resolution for both workers and residents.
6. <https://www.wastemanaged.co.uk/our-news/business-waste/birmingham-council-bin-strike-update/> - The ongoing strike by Birmingham City Council waste workers has significantly impacted various services. Household bin collections are not being carried out on weekdays, and weekend collections are not guaranteed. Kerbside recycling collection is on hold for the duration of the strike. Neatly bundled side-waste, such as cardboard and newspaper, will continue to be collected along with household bins. Garden waste collection, which is a paid subscription service, is on hold, with subscribers eligible for refunds. Bulky waste collection is also on hold, although previously booked collections will still be honored. The council advises residents to take their waste to one of the city’s Household Recycling Centres if possible or to hold onto their waste until regular collection resumes. The strike action relates to an ongoing dispute between the council and Unite the Union over pay, working conditions, and concerns about job grading. Unite has stated that refuse workers feel undervalued and are calling for fairer treatment. The council maintains that their proposed route forward enables them to fulfill their commitment to improving the Waste Service and comes after careful consideration. These strikes follow a period of financial difficulty for the council, which declared effective bankruptcy in September 2023.
7. <https://resource.co/article/council-approves-agreement-end-birmingham-bin-strike-13138> - Birmingham City Council and Unite the Union have reached an agreement to end the ongoing bin strike. The terms of the agreement include financial compensation for Unite members who were balloted for industrial action in 2017, payments for workers who claimed they were blacklisted during the current dispute, and the termination of Unite’s High Court case concerning the council’s breach of the agreement that ended the 2017 dispute. The council will cease utilizing mop-up crews without a qualified waste reduction collections officer on board and is committed to holding a recruitment day for agency staff to apply for permanent positions. All other outstanding legal issues have been resolved. Additionally, an independent review on future options for the delivery of the waste service will be commissioned by Birmingham City Council as part of its commitment to providing the best standard of service possible for Birmingham’s citizens, businesses, and visitors.