# Refuse workers' strike in Birmingham sparks public health crisis



In Birmingham, a significant industrial dispute involving refuse workers has led to a major public health concern, as uncollected rubbish piles high on the streets. The ongoing strikes, which commenced on 11 March 2023, are part of a disagreement between the Unite union members and the Birmingham City Council over pay and job cuts. As a result of these actions, the council has declared a major incident in response to the more than 17,000 tonnes of waste accumulating across the city.

Dr Elizabeth Sheridan, an infectious disease expert, has raised alarms regarding the potential spread of diseases typically associated with rodents, specifically Leptospirosis, which is commonly transmitted through contact with rat urine. Speaking to The Telegraph, she cautioned, "Most people don’t know they have been exposed to rat urine. You are at risk if you handle things that rats have been running over and that gets into your system." The prevailing warm weather, with temperatures hovering around 20°C, creates an ideal breeding environment for these creatures, which have been described by residents as being "the size of cats."

Birmingham City Council's struggle to manage this refuse crisis has included attempts to develop contingency plans; however, continuous picketing by striking workers has impeded refuse collection operations. According to a council spokesperson, logistical issues have meant that only one vehicle is able to operate out of its depots per hour, drastically reducing the city's collection capacity from the usual 500,000 per week.

Councillor John Cotton, the leader of Birmingham City Council, expressed his regret at the situation, stating, "It is regrettable that we have had to take this step, but we cannot tolerate a situation that is causing harm and distress to communities across Birmingham." The council has indicated that the declaration of a major incident will enable them to deploy additional street cleansing and fly-tipping removal resources, including an extra 35 vehicles and crews.

The crisis has sparked widespread criticism, including from refuse workers themselves. Councillor Majid Mahmood recently faced backlash after taking a trip to Egypt for charity work, amid residents' frustration over the failure to clear rubbish from the streets. Employees have voiced anger over what they perceive as a lack of commitment from city leaders. One anonymous worker was quoted as saying, "We're all fuming... it's unbelievable," reflecting their feelings of being unsupported during this challenging period.

Alongside the public health concerns related to potential disease outbreaks, pest control experts suggest the city's rat population is not only increasing in number but also in size, reportedly due to changes in their dietary habits, including behaviours such as cannibalism. Lee Maddocks, a pest control expert, noted that the conjunction of increased food waste and lower natural predation is leading to “super-sized” rodents that could pose risks to residents, especially children.

As the situation continues to unfold, the combination of industrial action among refuse workers and a growing rat population has created an urgent need for intervention. Local health authorities and pest control experts are advising residents to maintain strict hygiene practices when handling any potential refuse, stressing the importance of wearing gloves and washing hands thoroughly after any contact with waste.

The Birmingham City Council is in discussions with neighbouring authorities and the government to seek further support to mitigate the public health risks and restore order to waste collection services.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/uk/birmingham-streets-full-of-garbage-pests-and-stink-as-workers-strike-drags-on/articleshow/120002793.cms> - This article corroborates the large amount of uncollected rubbish in Birmingham, the public health risks associated with pests like rats, and the ongoing dispute between workers and the city council.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ko04t2xdjHw> - This video supports claims about the extensive rubbish problem in Birmingham due to the bin strike, impacting residents and highlighting public health concerns.
3. <https://www.fbu.org.uk/news/2025/04/07/firefighters-back-birmingham-bin-workers-and-will-not-clear-waste-says-fbu> - This article explains how firefighters are supporting the refuse workers by not clearing waste, highlighting solidarity among labor unions during the strike.
4. [https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jan/19/birmingham-bin-strike-council시키-pay-cut-plans](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jan/19/birmingham-bin-strike-council%EC%8B%9C%ED%82%A4-pay-cut-plans) - This source would discuss the background and ongoing nature of the dispute over pay cuts and job security between refuse workers and Birmingham City Council.
5. <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/birmingham-council-declares-major-incident-28502055> - This article details the declaration of a major incident by Birmingham City Council in response to the public health risks posed by the accumulating rubbish.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-64118995> - This source would provide additional details on the impact of the refuse crisis on Birmingham residents and the efforts by the council to manage the situation.
7. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/birmingham-bin-strikes-deadly-disease-35008279> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
8. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14577531/Birmingham-councillor-holiday-Egypt-rubbish.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
9. <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/cannibal-rats-the-size-cats-35006862> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
10. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14579115/rat-iBirmingham-weils-disease-leptospirosis-weils.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
11. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2038105/cannibal-rats-big-cats-could-attack-your-kids> - Please view link - unable to able to access data