

Drawing a Line

How Green Councillors can work with trade unions to oppose cuts and get a better deal for workers



Introduction

Local Government is in crisis. Fourteen years of Conservative cuts to public services have left local authorities scrambling to stay afloat. A Labour Government has been elected on the central promise of restoring public services, but so far offers sticking plasters. With over 800 Councillors, a number growing at every election, the Green Party has the opportunity to mount a coordinated challenge to this state of affairs.

Trade unions are key ally in this challenge, for three reasons:

1. **Trade unions represent the interests of council workers**, including 1.5 million employed directly, but also many more who are outsourced.
2. **Trade unions give a voice to ordinary people** who are on the ground but overlooked in debates around public services and cuts. They see first-hand how services work, and how people are affected.
3. **Trade unions have strong local, regional and national presences** which can be used to launch and amplify political campaigns.

Working with trade unions within and across councils therefore provides an opportunity to communicate the scale and causes of the current crisis, and to force the Government to take responsibility to act. Similarly, failing to engage with trade unions and their members represents material and political risks: disruption to service delivery, disempowered and unhappy staff, and being on the wrong side of the political debate around cuts.

This briefing aims to guide Green Councillors through working with trade unions, and offer practical steps towards a coherent political response to the current crisis.

Trade unions in local government

Local government is made up of a labyrinth of different workforces, and trade union representation reflects this messiness. Unions' presence and level of organisation can vary significantly depending on local and historical circumstances. The total local government workforce sits at 1.5 million in England and Wales, having declined by around a quarter since 2013. Average pay [remains](#) less than £30,000, less than £15 an hour. Trade union density figures vary between councils, but the national rates of around 50% trade union membership for public sector workers, and 20% for the private sector, give an idea of what to expect.

Three trade unions represent the majority of workers directly employed in local government: UNISON, Unite and GMB. Together they sit on the National Joint Council for Local Government Services, which is

responsible for negotiating on the sector's pay and conditions. All three of these unions are affiliated to Labour - and many of their Reps and members may be Labour members - but each have taken different political stances towards the party and local government disputes in recent years.

UNISON

UNISON is the largest trade union in the UK, with 1.4 million members, largely split between local government (around 300,000 members), health and education. It emerged from several public sector unions that included 'white collar' council workers, hence it is still the main union for that group. However, its membership in local government also extends significantly into care workers, school support staff and further education. Women make up more than 70% of UNISON membership overall.

UNISON's General Secretary is Christine McAnea, who is seen as close to the current Labour leadership. Threats of industrial action in local government in recent years have not materialised, with multiple ballots have been met with very low turnout. In the latest, [reportedly](#) just 29% of UNISON members voted on whether to strike on the National Joint Council pay offer of 2-6% (UNISON, GMB and Unite were pushing for 10%).

UNISON has strongly welcomed the new Government's flagship Employment Rights Bill, which includes a 'fair pay agreement' for school support staff in England and adult social care workers in England and Wales (most of whom sit in the private sector, largely non-unionised and outside local government, even while reliant on its funding). This is also known as collective bargaining, allowing pay, terms and conditions and standards to be set nationally, which historically tends to improve each for workers. No steps have yet been taken, however, to deliver the National Care Service promised by the Labour manifesto, a key campaign goal of UNISON.

GMB

GMB is the third-largest union in the UK with 560,000 members across almost all sectors, including [100,000](#) in local government and schools. It supported the recent national pay deal with the National Joint Council, although it has vestiges of militancy in local government and there are a number of ongoing disputes with individual councils (including [Brighton & Hove](#)). GMB is seen as the most reactionary of Labour's affiliated unions - it clashed with Corbyn on fracking and has urged Starmer to drop the goal of clean energy by 2030. An independent report commissioned by GMB in 2020 found the union to be "institutionally sexist", and the union has been criticised for ['backroom'](#) recognition deals with Uber, Deliveroo and Hermes, allowing GMB to negotiate on behalf of workers at those companies.

Unite

Unite is the second-largest union in the UK with 1.25 million members. It has around [60,000](#) members in local government, in often outsourced services such as street cleaning, waste management, recycling, school support, housing estates and maintenance. While the national pay offer was accepted by UNISON and GMB, Unite has [committed](#) to support individual branches which secured a mandate for industrial action on a council-by-council basis.

Its General Secretary, Sharon Graham, was elected in 2021 on a 'back to the workplace' strategy which promised to focus on building workplace power and winning disputes for members. This has brought Unite into conflict with the Labour leadership - it described the Employment Rights Bill as having "more holes than swiss cheese", and has launched a judicial review of the Government's Winter Fuel Payment cut.

Responding to cuts

Councils have attempted to deal with ever-increasing funding pressures in a range of ways, and even with different approaches across different services. A crude categorisation of possible approaches is as follows:

1. **Finessing cuts:** Many councils have maintained statutory service delivery while steadfastly salami-slicing discretionary services to the bone, and are now running out of room for further savings. Decisions not to invest and support preventative work in previous years (energy efficiency, building maintenance, youth services and SEND school places) have left many exposed to the 'polycrisis' of energy, housing and inflation, and are now firefighting as a result.
2. **Owning cuts:** Other councils have leant in to new and more radical operating models for local government: from Community Wealth Building in Preston to risky (and failed) investments in Thurrock and Croydon; wholesale 'transformation plans'; widespread selling off of land and other assets; and changing service delivery models (including outsourcing / contracting out services). These tend to sell a vision of ambition to staff and residents about the opportunities of a different kind of service, but ultimately are running into many of the same fundamental constraints of higher statutory needs and reduced resources after 14 years of cuts.
3. **Contesting cuts:** No council has attempted what Liverpool's Militant tendency tried in the 1980s, with the slogan "Better to break the law than break the poor". Setting an illegal budget today would simply trigger the Secretary of State to step in and remove the Council from control (and potentially prosecute Councillors). The bankruptcy of Birmingham City Council - Europe's largest local authority - has led to all non-statutory spending commitments axed, and external commissioners appointed.

What Green Councillors can do

Work with trade unions

- Regardless of whether you are in opposition or administration, make sure as a first step to reach out to and meet trade union reps at your council. You can request contact details from the regional offices of [UNISON](#), [GMB](#) and [Unite](#). Regional officers for local government are also worth having contact with as they will coordinate activity, but be aware these are paid (mostly full-time) union officials. Respect the internal democracy of unions, and their right to stand up for their members' material interests. See the [Labour Local Government Trade Union Principles](#) for an insight to their approach.
- Bring other interested unions into council and public debates, including the NEU for teachers, renters unions (such as [ACORN](#)), independent unions representing other workers affected by council policies ([IWGB](#), often representing couriers, and [UVW](#), often representing cleaners and security staff). Use your [regional Green Party Trade Union Liaison](#) to strengthen relationships, encourage members to back union activity and promote your good work with unions to residents.

Engage with staff

- Engage closely and positively with all staff, treating them with respect. Ensure that critique of the council (when in opposition) challenges the political leadership (and central Government!) rather than officers, and try to give officers advance notice when you plan to publicly challenge their reports.
- Encourage frank and public conversations with staff and residents about the extent of the local government funding crisis, what its roots are, the constraints the council is under, and what fundamental change is required to resolve it. Covering up cracks and selling a fake image of success will not improve morale or public support.

Coordinate nationally

- Look for opportunities to collaborate with councillors elsewhere, through the LGA or separately, to take the fight to central Government to restore council services. Independent councillors, and some in Labour, may be willing to support a more joined up campaign than local government has mounted to date.
- Push national policy campaigns that make the connection between council cuts and central Government funding choices. For example, underfunded councils struggle to deliver a broken adult social care system, when Government reform is overdue. In housing, temporary accommodation is destroying council budgets while Government refuse to control rents. And in public transport, residents deal with poor quality and expensive buses which councils can do little to improve. Passing motions and supporting campaigns for a National Care Service, rent controls and subsidised buses under local authority control can help raise these issues on the national agenda.

There are no easy options for elected Green Councillors. But the solidarity and organising potential of the labour movement is a key way we can build the case for a better deal for communities. If you are interested in working on these issues further, please get in touch with info@gptu.greenparty.org.uk.

Green Party Trade Union Group

The Green Party Trade Union Group represents trade unionists and allies in the Green Party of England and Wales. We believe that a powerful, organised labour movement bringing together millions of working people is essential to transforming society for people and planet. [Join us](#), and if you are a Councillor, get in touch to join the GPTU Councillors Whatsapp group.

Association of Green Councillors

[The AGC](#) is a network of elected Green Party Councillors from every level of local government in England and Wales. We represent over 800 principal authority councillors on councils across England and Wales, along with over 400 councillors on town and parish councils.

Appendix: Workers' rights and empowerment across council responsibilities

Workers' interests can be protected and advanced across an array of different council responsibilities and policies - not just where councils are the employer. Here we give a snapshot of how the workers' rights lens can be applied in each area and what Green Party policies are relevant.

Council responsibility	Workers rights / empowerment	Green Party policy / manifesto commitment
Climate change	Green jobs and a just transition Council-owned renewable energy projects	Just transition (see Cllr Nicola Day's motion)
Housing	Housing repair work investment Procurement policy for construction to include good work and training standards	£12bn to retrofit the social housing stock Provide 150,000 new social homes a year and end 'right to buy'
Public safety	Youth worker funding Skills and career opportunities	Proper funding for local authority youth services £1.4bn per year to be invested by local authorities in Sure Start Centres
Social care	Fair pay and conditions for carers Collective bargaining	Put social care on a footing with NHS (National Care Service) Additional £3bn for children's social care
Skills	Investment in skills and training Adult learning opportunities	£2bn per year business decarbonisation grants
Transport	Fair pay and conditions for bus workers	Council ownership of buses
Education	Fair pay and conditions for teachers and support staff	An increase in school funding, with an £8bn investment in schools including £2bn for a pay uplift for teachers.
SEND	Fair pay and conditions for SEND staff	£5bn investment in special needs (SEND) provision within mainstream schools

We'd love to hear your examples of how you have defended workers' rights in your council, including policies, motions or engagement activity that others could learn from. Let us know at info@gptu.greenparty.org.uk.