Glasgow City Council unions vote for strike action over equal pay

Workers at Glasgow City Council have voted overwhelmingly for legal strike action over equal pay measures *writes Mike Picke*n.

The trade union Unison's ballot ended on 1 March and the results were announced on 2 March (see below). Nearly 9,000 Unison members employed directly by the Council voted in a postal ballot, 96% in favour of strike action on a turnout of 52.5%.

Under the reactionary anti-trade union laws of the Conservative UK Government, postal ballots for strike action have to exceed a legal threshold of a 50% turnout. Given the difficulties of postal ballots sent to home addresses having to be returned through the post in an era of electronic communication in the workplace, this is an extremely difficult challenge and the fact that this threshold was exceeded and an overwhelming vote for a strike carried shows the huge strength of feeling among rank and file workers. Unfortunately the 50% threshold was not quite exceeded in the subsidiary employer "Glasgow Life", an 'Arms Length Management Organisation" (ALMO) notionally a charity, used by the Council to deliver cultural, leisure and recreation services such as sports centres, arts venues, museums, libraries and community centres across the City. Nevertheless the 91% vote for strike action on a 48% turnout indicates the strength of feeling in that part of the Council's services.

The GMB union also balloted its Glasgow City Council members affected by the dispute and achieved a 97.8% vote for strike action on a more than 50% turnout from its members in social

care, cleaning and catering services.

GMB Scotland Organiser Sean Baillie told the Glasgow Times:

> *"Our members need equal pay justice and an end to the discriminatory pay and grading system that remains in place.*
>
> *"That's the clear message this ballot result sends to the council officials who should be negotiating properly with our claimant groups and to every councillor seeking election in May.*
>
> *"The council's liabilities are growing every working hour of every working day and the cost will likely run into the hundreds of million yet again, so the situation is critical for our members, the services they deliver, and the city's finances.*
>
> *"That's why we need an urgent negotiation process to be conducted in good faith between the council and the claimant groups, if strike action is to be avoided." Sean Baillie GMB Scotland Organiser*
>
> *https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/19964224.equal-pay-strikes-hit-glasgow-end-month-unions-back-action/*

GMB members demanding equal pay

Unite, the third union involved in the equal pay dispute, is balloting members currently, with a closing date of 14 March.

The pressure is now on the SNP-led Council to come up with a

resolution by introducing new proposals for compensation and equal pay grading. The SNP leadership inherited the crisis in Glasgow City Council in 2017 when it took over from a Labour Council found guilty of pay discrimination against women workers over decades but promised to settle the issue and introduce both compensation and a new pay and grading system that they have failed to do.

In the run-up to the local Council elections on 5 May, resolving this dispute is major challenge for the SNP Council leadership and also raises the question of whether the SNP-led Scottish government and their Scottish Green partners have the wherewithal to come up with financial support for the cash-strapped Council that can enable resolution. If they fail in this, then strikes will almost certainly go ahead against the backdrop of the Council elections. Solidarity and support from workers and residents across Glasgow and beyond will be vital in the event of strikes to ensure a victory in this long-running battle for equal pay. A separate Scotland-wide pay award campaign for council workers from 1 April is also ongoing by the unions.

3 March 2022

UNISON Glasgow media release:

UNISON
the public service union

UNISON members in Glasgow City Council have voted overwhelmingly for strike action in the dispute over equal pay compensation payments.
96% of members voted for strike action, on a turnout of 52.5%.
Just under 9,000 workers were balloted.
Lyn Marie O'Hara, UNISON Branch Depute Chair, said:
"This is a huge vote for action and a clear message to the council to resolve the dispute.
The UNISON branch will now request authorisation for strike action from our NEC and be liaising with our sister trade unions on the next steps in the industrial dispute.
The trade unions will also continue to receive regular updates from the claimants joint legal team on the current negotiations with the council lawyers. The council should now listen."

To Unison Glasgow members:

UNISON Strike Ballot Results – Equal Pay Compensation Payments Dispute
UNISON members in Glasgow City Council have voted overwhelmingly for strike action in the dispute over equal pay compensation payments.
96% of members voted for strike action, on a turnout of 52.5%.
This is a huge vote for action and a clear message to the council to resolve the dispute. The UNISON branch will now request authorisation for strike action from our NEC and be liaising with our sister trade unions on the next steps in the industrial dispute. The trade unions will also continue to receive regular updates from the claimants joint legal team on the current negotiations with the council lawyers. The council should now listen.
The vote in Glasgow Life was also for strike action however the turnout in the ballot was just short of the 50% threshold required under the current UK anti-trade union laws. Nevertheless, this is still a very clear message from UNISON members in Glasgow Life on the need for equal pay justice. 91% of members in Glasgow Life voted for strike action, on a turnout of 48%.

Further communications will be issued in due course.
Well done to all who voted in the two strike ballots.
UNISON Glasgow Branch
https://www.facebook.com/UnisonGlasgowCity/

Battle lines begin to be drawn in Scottish councils

Over 50 trade union and community activists braved the storms to attend a protest outside the headquarters of Glasgow City Council, the Glasgow City Chambers in George Square, on 17 February *writes Mike Picken for ecosocialist.scot*.

The protest was against the budget setting meeting of Glasgow City Council and demanded 'no cuts' in council services and support for council workers pay demands in the face of a huge 'cost of living' crisis.

Among those attending and addressing the protests were representatives of Glasgow City council worker unions involved in pay disputes – Unite, Unison, GMB – alongside those involved in 'Glasgow Against Closures' community groups formed to fight the threatened cuts to the Council's library, museums and leisure centres and other facilities.

The protest was also attended by representatives of the Universities and Colleges Union at nearby Strathclyde University, currently involved in a strike against university employers over pensions, pay, working conditions and casualisation.

The protest was both part of an ongoing campaign against current cuts and closure plans of the SNP-led Council and the first shots in a battle around council funding in the run-up

to the major Scottish Council Elections on Thursday 5 May.

Scottish government has underfunded councils

The Scottish Government has underfunded Councils for a decade as priority has been given to those public services under the direct control of the Government. While it is true that under the current devolution settlement the Scottish Government has been allocated a cash-restricted budget and unlike the UK government is limited under devolution in its ability to raise taxes on the rich or increase borrowing to defend public services, the cuts imposed on Scottish council budgets by the SNP-led government are seriously damaging to Scotland's working class and most deprived communities. Following the last council elections in 2017, for the first time ever no one party has a majority of control of any of Scotland's 32 councils with every council having a hotch-potch of minority control or coalition governance. This makes it an easy target for cuts from a Scottish government that does not adequately challenge the UK government's spending reductions.

Glasgow City Council faces a specific budget crisis due not only to the challenges of being Scotland's largest city, one of the poorest localities in the UK, and the continuing impact of the Covid pandemic but also due to the ongoing costs of the settlement of the successful equal pay court action brought by unions against the previous Labour council. The SNP-led minority council took office in 2017, as Labour were unceremoniously booted out of office by voters after around 40 years of control. While the new SNP leadership promised to deal with the spiralling costs of the equal pay settlement, they have failed to either introduce an adequate new pay structures or defend council services from cuts. This has resulted in a strike ballot for those on the affected grades by three of the council's unions – Unite, Unison, GMB – over

the issue of a new pay structure. The ballot closes on 1 March and results will be expected shortly, but under the draconian UK government anti-union laws achieving the 50% turnout in a postal ballot in all three unions is a major challenge.

Glasgow community facilities face Council cuts

The SNP-led Glasgow City Council has also been strongly condemned for trying to save money by the closure of community facilities run by the Council's subsidiary "Glasgow Life", including local libraries and the iconic Glasgow Green and Peoples' Palace. The Council's budget approved at the meeting on 17 February includes as yet unclear cuts in services while "Glasgow Life" continues to try to transfer facilities to so-called community trusts, that are basically privatisation of public services. The budget for the council year from 1 April 2022 was passed by the City Council and includes cuts and a council tax rise of 3 percent. The Scottish Green Party councillors voted for the SNP budget. While Labour councillors claim to be against cuts, Labour's legacy of 40 years running the City including underpaying women workers resulting in the biggest equal pay court victory in UK history hardly inspires confidence. Their argument that the SNP also voted for discriminatory pay structures introduced by the ruling Labour group is somewhat of an irrelevant diversion from their own leading role in discrimination against women and the mismanagement of the City's finances. The ongoing battle to defend council facilities against budget cuts is being led by local groups who have united into the "Glasgow Against Closures" network. The battle against cuts and closures will continue.

Scottish Council Pay dispute continues

During 2021 bin workers in the GMB voted for industrial action over their national pay demands and local management of the service striking for a week during the COP26 conference in Glasgow. This resulted in some additional funding from the SNP Scottish Government, concerned at the global image of Glasgow being portrayed. In an important development those descending on Glasgow from the global climate justice movement, particularly Fridays for the Future activist Greta Thunberg, declared their solidarity with the bin workers and supported GMB picket lines. GMB members also marched on the Fridays for the Future demonstration in Glasgow during COP26 in an important display of solidarity for the struggles between climate justice and social justice. The underlying issues surrounding the bin worker strikes, however, have yet to be resolved.

While the national council workers' pay claim for 2021 was eventually settled very late in the year, the pay claim from 1 April 2022 is still ongoing – council worker unions across Scotland are demanding a £3,000 per year pay rise and a minimum wage of £12 per hour to cope with the Tory cost of living crisis where inflation is now heading for around 7% and gas/electricity costs are heading through the roof. School teachers – members of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) union – have rejected the 2021-22 pay offer and demanded an improved offer; teachers are also drawing up demands for a 10% pay rise from 1 April 2022. While not employed by local councils, teachers in Scotland's 26 Further Education Colleges are also balloting on strike action and the ongoing disputes over pay and pensions in Scotland's 19 university institutions are still going on, with University and College Union (UCU) members engaging in strike action across Scotland. The opportunities for a united front by Scottish unions on public

sector pay exist.

Crucial Council elections on 5 May

All this forms the backdrop for the Council elections on 5 May. While there will be national issues including the Tory UK government's cost of living crisis and the battle for Scottish Independence, the elections will also highlight local issues over council finances and cuts. Despite being opposed to the main system for local financing, the Council Tax introduced by the Tories after mass opposition drove the Poll Tax into oblivion in 1991, the SNP have failed in their commitment to abolish the Council Tax and reform council financing despite 15 years of SNP Scottish Governments. Local council services have been increasingly centralised and controlled from Holyrood rather than locally while public finance to Councils has been cut in real terms. The SNP's proposals for the much vaunted National Care Service is underfinanced and highly centralised. Action passed in legislation in 2019 to enable Scottish councils set up municipally-owned bus services has yet to see the light of day. While free bus travel has now been introduced for those 21 and under, the majority of the population face spiralling public transport costs including 3% fares rises and major service cuts on the ScotRail train network, due to be taken over shortly by the Scottish Government from the failing private operator Abellio. The case for free public transport across Scotland is now urgent as a response to both the climate and cost of living crises.

However there seems little chance of the major changes needed from the continuation of SNP-led governance at local and national level. Labour is 'under new management' from the Starmer-supporting Anas Sarwar, but in local politics seems largely to be just rhetorically opposing the SNP without any serious alternative or change from its austerity-driven past. Scottish Labour was during the 1990s the dominant party of

Scottish local councils with over half the 1,200 councillors and control of two thirds of the 32 councils. Due to its opposition to Scottish self-determination, it now faces an ongoing and existential crisis among its membership and voters as it continues to languish in third place on around 20% having lost control of all its last remaining councils including Glasgow in 2017. The coalition administration of Labour in 2017 as junior partner with the despised Tories to run Aberdeen City Council was denounced by the Scottish Labour leadership at the time and the nine councillors 'suspended'; but no further action was taken and the councillors have all been readmitted to the Party recently by its new leadership. The Daily Record has recently reported that the most senior Labour councillor in Scotland has declared her separation from the Party and will stand as an Independent.

The Scottish Greens have a foothold in both government and some local councils, but are not providing an alternative to the SNP. Those opposing the cuts and wanting to see serious change, including decent pay for council workers, need to look elsewhere – though there is little signs of any kind of major electoral alternative being posed across Scotland. The Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) are expected to stand in eight of the 300+ wards across Scotland – including four wards in Glasgow and in Edinburgh, North Ayrshire and Renfrewshire – but that is half what they stood in 2017 and a long way short of the concerted national campaign needed. SSP candidates will be committed to opposing all cuts, supporting the council workers pay demands, abolishing the council tax, free public transport and other aspects of a genuine Red-Green opposition to the Tories at Westminster and the SNP at Holyrood.

It remains to be seen whether a serious electoral opposition can emerge during these elections but the battles in support of unions and community campaigns must go on.

26 February 2022

Scottish Socialist Party is standing in four Glasgow wards in the local elections, calling for defiance of cuts and support for action

Glasgow City Unison members are among those being balloted for industrial action over equal pay

Unite members join forces with UCU strikers in Glasgow

Striking UCU workers at Strathclyde University address Glasgow Council protests

All pictures: Mike Picken

Scottish council strikes

suspended as government and councils make new offer

The Scottish council strikes due to take place during COP26 have been suspended due to the Scottish government and Scottish councils' umbrella body COSLA, making a new pay offer, *reports Mike Picken for ecosocialist.scot.*

The new offer came at the eleventh hour as council workers in Glasgow were preparing to strike from Monday 1 November, with members of the GMB union threatening to cease all refuse collection and severely disrupt schools in the City as it hosts the world leaders attending COP26.

The revised pay offer came after months of stalling by the employers and government saying there was no further money to afford a better offer than that rejected by the three unions representing the 120,000 council workers affected by the pay award. Negotiations have stalled for 18 months as essential workers continued to work throughout the pandemic without any pay increase.

According to unions and media reports, the new money came in the form of an additional last minute £30 million funding from the Scottish government and £18.5 million from within existing council budgets. The new offer amounts to a flat rate rise of £1,062 for those earning below £25,000 per year (the majority of workers), representing a 5.89% percent pay rise for those on the lowest pay. The pay award is backdated to April 2021 and runs for 12 months.

The unions have suspended the threatened strikes, including those in Glasgow due to start on Monday 1 November, and will now consult members about whether to accept the pay award over the next fortnight. Unions will also almost immediately begin negotiations over a new pay award from April 2022 at a time

when the cost-of-living is spiralling upwards across Britain, particularly energy costs which are a higher burden in Scotland due to the colder climate. Official UK inflation is already over 4% and set to rise in coming months.

The offer falls well short of the joint demand by the unions for a £2,000/£10 per hour minimum pay award, but by winning a mandate for industrial action, despite the legal obstacles, and effective public campaigning the unions have shown how employers can be challenged on pay by the threat of strike action. The funding of the revised offer also indicates that despite trying to wash its hands of the dispute the Scottish government of the SNP, in alliance with the Scottish Green Party, is a key player in council finances and pressure needs to be kept up on them for decent public services at council level and a reversal of all cuts.

Scottish rail workers win victory as council strikes go ahead

On almost the eve of COP26 in Glasgow, Scottish rail workers have won a stunning victory on pay while council workers still plan to strike. *Mike Picken reports for ecosocialist.scot*

Late on Wednesday 27 October, after an arbitrary deadline set by the employers had passed, the RMT trade union **accepted a new pay offer** forced out of ScotRail by the threat of a total

two week closure of the network during COP26.

The RMT won a 2.5% twelve month pay award backdated to last April, an extra £300 for all ScotRail workers due to the pressures of hosting COP26, and an improvement in terms on working rest days. Following the decisive vote for all out strike action by RMT members and months of action on Sundays that shut most of the network, the employers offered a 4.7% increase over two years coupled with a worsening of terms and conditions. While other rail unions accepted the RMT stuck out and forced a new offer.

> *RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch in hailing the victory has also called on SERCO to resolve the parallel dispute on the Caledonian Sleeper service. Linking the rail workers claims for investment in rail in the light of the COP, Lynch stated: "There can be no climate justice without workplace justice".*

On the same day that the RMT called for the Caledonian Sleeper service between Scotland and London to be transformed into an alternative to air travel, the UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak announced that he would be cutting air passenger taxes on domestic flights and freezing fuel duty, promoting air and road travel at the expense of rail and the climate.

Demonstration 6 November

The victory and calling off of the industrial action means that thousands of environmental activists attending the COP26

and the big demonstration on 6 November will now be able to use the train network to get to Glasgow. It's a victory for all workers in Scotland and shows that strong trade union action can force concessions from reluctant employers, despite the UK government's draconian anti-trade union that make it exceptionally difficult to win a legal postal ballot. Rail workers will now be set to demand further improvements in workers conditions and reinstate rail service cuts when the ScotRail service is transferred from the private Abellio company to a publicly owned service run by the Scottish government in March 2022.

Council Strikes

Despite the victory on rail, the strikes over pay planned by Glasgow City Council workers are still going ahead and will escalate across other parts of Scotland during the COP26, as unions stepped up joint action over local government pay.

A series of ballots have been held in Scotland's 32 councils to reject the miserly pay offer affecting around 120,000 workers offered by the employers' body, COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities). GMB union members in Glasgow's cleansing and schools departments have already voted for strike action from 1 November that would stop rubbish collection and severely disrupt schools across the City. Further ballots among selected workers for strike action have been successful in a large number of councils. On 25 October the joint union committee for the pay negotiations, comprising the Unite, Unison and GMB unions, wrote to the employers and announced that they were calling further action across the country from 8 November. The workers coming out on strike cover school cleaning, school catering, school janitorial, waste, recycling and fleet maintenance services, and will have a severe effect on the operations of a majority of Scottish

councils.

The joint union pay demand is for a paying increase of at least £2,000 or 6% and a minimum of at least £10.50 per hour. The employers offer of only £850 or 2%, with a minimum pay rate of £9.78 per hour has been decisively rejected by unions.

Council workers in vital public services such as cleansing are demanding to be treated as essential worker, like NHS and care workers during the pandemic. The SNP-led council in Glasgow has been under constant attack in recent weeks for the state of the city's refuse and vermin infestations. While the Council leaders are desperately trying to present the best possible image of a 'clean city' during COP26 when the eyes of the world will be on Glasgow, only a proper investment in council services and workers can produce such an outcome. As if a reminder of the effect of climate change, the City was deluged with torrential rainfall on the evening of 27 October causing floods and mess that had to be sorted by the very same council workers taking strike action the following week.

Workers across Britain face a huge cost-of-living crisis emerging from the pandemic, with spiralling energy costs and price increases due to the road haulage driver shortage exacerbated by the Tories 'hard' Brexit, increases in national insurance and income tax, and cuts in benefits including for those in low paid jobs, while the wealthy avoid paying their fair share through selective tax cuts that benefit them like the reduction in taxes on internal flights. The Tory UK government's Budget and Public Expenditure announcements from the Chancellor on 27 October do little to address the crisis in living standards of working class people. The Tories say they want a high wage economy – but they only raised the minimum wage to £9.50 for those over 23 while private sector employers squeal about the impact of raising wages on their profits and many public sector budgets face real terms cuts in government funding. The only way to deal with the cost of living crisis is by workers joining unions and demanding pay

rises through the threat of industrial action.

SNP, Greens and Labour need to take action

Scottish councils are primarily funded by the Scottish government – now comprising the Scottish Greens in an agreement with the SNP administration. Labour is also making noises in support of increased pay and between them the SNP, Labour and Scottish Greens, all 'left-of-centre' political parties, have over half of all Scottish Councillors influencing the COSLA employers. Both Labour and the SNP lead various administrations in the councils, though Labour to their shame are in coalition with Tories in several councils and a Labour councillor in West Lothian defected to the Tory party earlier this week.

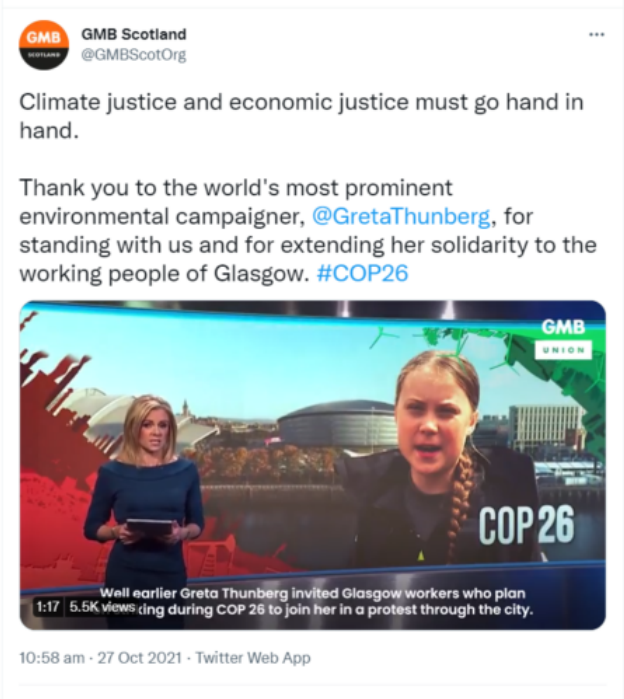
Both the Scottish government and councillors in the three parties (and independents) should put pressure on COSLA to make an immediate improvement in the pay offer and urgently re-open negotiations with the unions.

If there are council worker strikes from 1 November, other workers should join picket lines and show solidarity so that the council workers are not isolated.

Thunberg offers solidarity

In an excellent initiative, environmental activist Greta Thunberg has agreed to come to Glasgow for COP26 during the strikes to address the Fridays for the Future school strike and demonstration on Friday 5 November, and has called for support for striking workers. That this solidarity has been welcomed by GMB Scotland , a union that traditionally has had a defensive attitude towards fossil fuel industries, is a step

forward in further linking the environmental and workers movement.



Glasgow communities march against closures and cuts

Hundreds of protesters marched through the streets of Glasgow city centre on Saturday 16 October to oppose the City Council plans to close community facilities.

The SNP-led City Council has put forward a programme of expenditure cuts in the face of the growing financial crisis of Scotland's 32 councils.

Central to the cuts programme in Glasgow is the closures of libraries, leisure and community facilities organised through "*Glasgow Life*" – a semi autonomous, undemocratic offshoot of the council (officially called an Arms Length External Organisation or "ALEO", a common feature of Scottish councils).

Council "nasty trick"

Rather than close facilities directly, the Council plans to squeeze funding forcing Glasgow Life to declare facilities are unviable and offer to hand them over instead to "community trusts" through a "Community Asset Transfer". This means that instead of being run by the Council, using professional staff and having municipal-level economies of scale, small groups of volunteers will need to fundraise to support essential facilities like libraries and community centres. It's a nasty trick that's long been used by the Tories in England, aided and abetted by Labour councils like those in Birmingham and Waltham Forest. The elected politicians wash their hands of the services by handing control over which stay open or go to unelected officers, and rely on the "goodwill" and voluntary efforts of community groups to keep services going.

Trade unions and communities using the facilities currently under threat by the cuts by Glasgow Life have banded together to form the new **"Glasgow Against Closures"** protest movement.

The demonstration on Saturday marched from the City's shopping area, under the watchful gaze of the statue of Labour politician Donald Dewar, to the People's Palace in Glasgow Green to hear speakers protesting against the cuts. While there were

a lot of lefty paper sellers selling their wares to each other, the important element in the protest was the engagement from local community activists like the campaigns in Drumchapel, Ruchill, Maryhill and Whiteinch parts of the City, alongside support from union members especially members of Unite the union who were prominent on the march.

Municipal Financial Crisis

The municipal financial crisis has been exacerbated by the pandemic, but it has long been a problem that the Scottish devolved government is responsible for central funding of local government alongside the priorities of other directly funded central government services, the NHS in particular. As the demands on NHS Scotland grow and the 'national' services delivered by councils, like schools and social care, are under pressure with protected funding, the SNP Scottish government has slashed the block grant for other local services run by councils. Councils have very little source of revenue to run local services independent of their Scottish government block grant. The Council Tax is a thoroughly discredited and regressive 30 year old tax system introduced by the Tories, which both the SNP and Labour before them have criticised but failed to replace when in office. While Glasgow is the largest council and faces a particular crisis because of the cost of the equal pay settlement, all Scottish councils face the same challenges.

The SNP argue that the Scottish government, unlike the UK government for England, is forced to depend on a fixed budget with little ability to tax and raise revenue. The SNP answer to this is that rather than resist the austerity imposed on them by the Tories, we should wait for "Jam Tomorrow" in the shape of independence. The Tory UK government Spending Review on 27 October will unleash another wave of cuts in public services across the UK state with budgets in Scotland largely tied to how much is spent by the Tories in England through the

‘Barnett formula’. The reality is that Scotland is not going to achieve independence from the Tory UK government if it just means the ‘same old Tory austerity’ in new SNP clothes and a fightback to defend council services is an essential element of the battle for independence.

We urge everyone to support the union and community campaigns in their street protests and activities against the cuts today, as an essential part of the struggle for an independent and ecosocialist Scotland in future. Glasgow is the start but action needs to be built across Scotland. Five yearly ‘all-out’council elections are also due in May 2022 and there should be discussions now about a concerted united electoral challenge in local communities, to highlight the fight against the cuts and closures and build resistance across Scotland. While support from individual Labour Party members and supporters is very much welcome, we should beware the Scottish Labour Party leadership’s record of empty rhetoric against the SNP – savage cuts were also implemented during periods of Labour control of councils and the UK and Scottish governments and Labour’s support for the union saddles Scotland with Tory governments it has never voted for.

Drumchapel residents protest under the watchful eye of Donald Dewar

Get Involved

To get involved in Glasgow Against Closures, visit the Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/glasgowagainstclosures/ follow the campaign on Twitter, **@glasgowclosures** (https://twitter.com/glasgowclosures) and get involved in local groups.

(All photographs and words by Mike Picken, ecosocialist.scot)

Unite Community West of Scotland puts the case against Closures