

British firefighters strike against cuts and job losses in Essex

Steve James
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Three hundred fire fighters struck on June 8 and 12 against Essex Combined Fire Authority's decision to cut 16 jobs. The Fire Authority is seeking to save around £300,000 by replacing them with part-time fire fighters on specialist emergency vehicles. The June 12 strike coincided with demonstrations in Chelmsford and Brentwood, and plans for another one-day strike. The action followed a ballot returning a large majority for industrial action.

The fire fighters defied a letter from management, sent to every Fire Brigade Union (FBU) member in Essex, threatening that strikers were "liable to be dismissed." After the first walkout, management locked out the fire fighters for another four hours, while ancient and dangerous "Green Goddess" Army fire tenders patrolled Essex. These were operated by soldiers with only four hours training.

Essex Fire Authority, which is controlled jointly by the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties, want part-time "retained fire fighters" to replace full-timers. Retained fire fighters are only paid when they are actually called out on an emergency. They are summoned by radio pager and only receive two hours training per week. Chelmsford has many multi-storey buildings, particularly office blocks. With retained fire fighters, the aerial ladder needed to effect a rescue from such buildings would inevitably arrive at any emergency later than with full-time fire crews, resulting in further death and injury.

The dispute follows years of continual pressure on the fire service budget. In 1996, demonstrations by fire fighters prevented the imposition of job losses in the service, and around £1 million cuts were made elsewhere. In 1997 the fire fighters held a string of seven short strikes which again fended off cuts.

This time the Authority appears to be more prepared

for a decisive confrontation. Immediately prior to the dispute, a statement issued by the Fire Authority Chairman and Labour Party councillor, Tony Wright, claimed that cuts would involve no loss of safety cover. He went on, "these strikes are not about protecting front-line jobs. These strikes are to jealously guard perks." The introduction of part-timers was, he said, "a damaging but essential series of battles for this Authority."

The sacking threat has resonated in hundreds of fire stations across the country that face similar cut—for example, around 56 jobs are under threat in Northumberland. The FBU has been inundated with reports from branch officials as far away as Glasgow in Scotland, warning of spontaneous walkouts if fire fighters are sacked in Essex. Delegations of fire fighters have attended demonstrations in Chelmsford from Northern Ireland, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, Avon and Durham, as well as from many local brigades.

Faced with nation-wide calls for action, the FBU are desperate to avoid an escalation of the dispute. At a press conference, FBU leader Ken Cameron insisted that the source of the dispute was Essex County Council's refusal to release £26 million of reserves. "It is disgraceful that threats are being made when we should be sitting around a table," he added. Cameron noted that emergency call-outs have doubled over the last 20 years, "when there are less fire fighters and less fire appliances."

But the FBU has allowed this situation to develop. For years the union has insisted that every dispute over funding is a purely local issue and has collaborated in pushing through cuts. In Liverpool in 1996, for example, the union examined the Fire Authority's accounts and then called for greater cuts than were initially proposed. The FBU have prevented any unified

struggle by fire workers by insisting that national action is illegal because of the anti-union laws. In relation to Chelmsford, Cameron told the *Guardian* newspaper, “there is a serious threat that this could escalate into a national strike, which we would obviously wish to avoid.”

Several Chelmsford fire fighters spoke to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“The Labour government should be given another year,” said one worker, “but people should remember the last time Labour were in power when we struck against them. They’ll face even more strikes this time.”

Another said, “I don’t know why this conservative government calls itself Labour. They should be called the New Tories. We already know that Labour are not going to give any more than the Tories.”

“New Labour, old Conservative,” added an older worker, “Although they’ve changed the government, it hasn’t changed the mentality of the politicians at all. Unless someone sits down and proves to me that there has been a change of government, we’ll treat them the same, because there is no difference between them.”



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