

Essex fire fighters take action

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Fire fighters in Essex, England, east of London, have begun industrial action against the local Fire Authority's decision to cut 16 jobs and downgrade vital fire appliances at Chelmsford Fire Station.

The one-day strike and two two-hour stoppages are against the Authority's intention to store or remove an aerial ladder, or staff it with part-time fire fighters. Storage or removal would mean an aerial ladder would have to be driven to any fire in Chelmsford from Colchester, a 40-minute drive. Home Office guidelines presently insist that an aerial ladder be within 20 minutes of high-rise buildings. Doubling the response time would endanger lives.

Staffing by part-time fire fighters, who are summoned by pager and receive only two hours of weekly training, poses the same dangers. An aerial ladder is a computerised appliance, which requires training and skill to be properly operated.

The fire station is presently crewed by four shifts of two full-time fire fighters, a leading fire fighter and a station officer. Without the ladder and a full-time crew, no one in the Chelmsford area could be safely rescued from above a building's fifth floor.

The fire fighters' considered and highly professional attitude to public safety contrasts sharply with Essex Fire Authority's cynical indifference. Tony Wright, the Labour Party Chair of the Fire Authority, described maintaining full-time crews as "restrictive practices" and denied that these were frontline posts. Wright and the Fire Authority intend to once again use the army and its decrepit Green Goddess civil defence tenders during the strikes and the 22-hour lockouts that the Fire Authority intends to impose after next week's two-hour stoppages.

The 928 Essex fire fighters have won support from across the country. The Fire Authority's threat to sack anyone involved in industrial action led to nation-wide calls for walkouts and a national strike. Up to 1,000

Fire Brigade Union (FBU) members travelled from all parts of Britain to support an Essex fire fighters demonstration last week.

In contrast, FBU officials have insisted there should be no national action against either the sacking threats, or the cutbacks. In London, 80 fire fighters' jobs are threatened and two stations face closure. But the FBU hopes to contain the Essex dispute as an isolated bush fire while it tries to re-open negotiations with the Fire Authority.

FBU regional official Keith Hanscombe has written to all the members of the Fire Authority "in order to bypass the political blockage." His letter states: "Any window of opportunity to break the deadlock will be welcomed by the FBU. Unfortunately, our willingness does not seem to be matched by the political barons of the Fire Authority."

There has been a dramatic increase in fire fighters' workloads over the last years. An FBU press release reported that Essex stations handled 39,976 emergency calls and mobilised for 25,278 incidents. This is a 50 percent increase since 1988. Chelmsford figures show a similar pattern. In 1981 the Chelmsford station took 751 fire calls, in 1986 there were 984, and by 1996 the number had risen to 2,365.

During the same period, fire fighters have had to deal with more complicated emergencies. Industrial and commercial development in the area and a huge rise in traffic mean that car accidents, people trapped in lifts, flooding, as well as home and industrial fires are continually increasing. Last year the county's chief fire officer called for a new fire station to be built to deal with commercial and domestic emergencies at and around Stansted--one of London's three airports. But since the early 1990s the county's staffing level has been reduced, from around 970 to 928 today.

Last November the Labour government presented a consultation paper to parliament entitled, "Fire Safety

Legislation for the Future." This detailed the government's intention to scrap the legal obligation on all businesses to comply with their Fire Authorities' fire prevention proposals. All but the most "high risk establishments" will decide what is a suitable level of fire provision. The moves guarantee that employers, particularly small businesses, will ignore fire safety, with the inevitable dangers this brings.

As camouflage, Labour intends to force fire fighters into a "community safety" role, i.e., lecturing on domestic fire safety. This is to create a climate in which fire deaths can be blamed on individual mistakes at work and in the home, rather than on social conditions, corporate cost-cutting and state policy.



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