

Britain: Nationwide firefighters strike draws closer

Our correspondent
5 September 2002

A nationwide firefighters strike—the first for 25 years—drew closer this week following the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) rejection of a government proposal to hold an independent review of their pay.

The FBU is calling for a wage increase of 40 percent for firefighters in order to bring their pay up to £30,000 per annum. A qualified firefighter is currently paid just £21,500 per annum.

The FBU's demand has been rejected by the national Fire Authority, which has offered a pay deal of just four percent. Last-minute talks in London on September 2 between the two sides lasted just 90 minutes, despite a demonstration outside by thousands of firefighters from around the country, protesting the fire authorities derisory award. The Fire Authority dismissed the union's demands as "unrealistic".

In an unprecedented move, Prime Minister Tony Blair intervened quickly to back the employer's stance and reject FBU demands out of hand. At a September 3 press conference in his Sedgefield constituency in the north east of England, Blair called on firefighters not to strike and stated that a 40 percent pay deal would devastate the UK economy.

Blair said, "It would be lovely to pay people as much as they wanted. What we have done is to say 'why don't we have an independent inquiry to see if things are working properly'. If we offer that, I can't see it is justified to take industrial action. I don't think there's anybody really who could believe that we could give a 40 percent pay claim without terrible damage to the rest of the economy. The first thing that would happen is the Bank of England would start putting people's mortgages up."

There was anger at the prime minister's intervention, with firefighters interviewed on television complaining that the government had the money to prepare for war

with Iraq, but not to pay life-saving employees a living wage.

Firefighters in 30 different areas of the UK have already begun a series of unofficial and indefinite "work-to-rules". Greater Manchester firefighters joined an unofficial action that began in Scotland for 24 hours whilst Avon Fire Brigade confirmed they were working-to-rule in relation to emergency calls. Other locations where unofficial action is taking place are in the South West, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Northants, Norfolk, Suffolk and Bedfordshire.

Earlier this week the FBU said that it intends to recall its national conference on September 12, to discuss calling a strike ballot following a breakdown of the 90-minute meeting with fire authority management. FBU General Secretary Andy Gilchrist said that, "Our members are clear that they deserve the going rate for the job they do today, which is £30,000 and we are therefore not going to get caught up in a so-called independent governmental review into the fire service."

Armed forces "Green Goddess" fire engines, which were used during the last nationwide strike in 1977, are being readied to intervene in the event of a strike. The Retained Firefighters Union (RFU), which has 4,000 part-time firefighters covering mainly rural areas without main fire stations, has said it will not support a strike.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact