

Britain: Firefighters speak on threatened strike

Our correspondent
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Britain's firefighters are to vote on whether to stage the first national strike for a quarter of a century. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU), which organises 55,000 firefighters, will announce the result on October 18. The FBU is demanding a pay rise of almost 40 percent, taking firefighters' pay to £30,000, having rejected an offer of just 4 percent from local government employers.

The government has attempted to forestall industrial action by convening a supposedly independent review of firefighters' pay. It is headed by Sir George Bain, who was in charge of the Low Pay Commission which introduced Britain's paltry minimum wage. Bain will be joined by Sir Tony Young, the former head of Britain's trade union federation, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and former Birmingham City Council chief executive, Sir Michael Lyons—all pro-Labour government stalwarts.

The review will naturally reject the 40 percent demand out of hand and will link pay to changes in pay and working conditions. The FBU has rejected participation in the review, in face of the rising levels of anger amongst firefighters.

Andy Gilchrist, FBU general secretary, said: "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 in the fire service."

A qualified firefighter is presently paid a miserly £21,531, rising to £22,491 after 15 years. A station officer is paid between £27,426 and £29,577.

Prime Minister Tony Blair rejected the 40 percent demand, because it is a direct challenge to his government's strategic aim of maintaining Britain as a cheap labour platform within the European single market. In an effort to pit firefighters against other working families, Blair warned, "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."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to two London firemen about their thoughts on the threatened strike.

Dave is a senior firefighter based at Park Royal Station in West London. He spoke of the appalling pay and conditions that have prompted the strike demand:

"You have got a probation period of a year and you get qualified after a further three years. Your starting pay is judged by your age. The worst-case scenario being an 18-year-old firefighter would be on between £18-19,000.

"Once you're a qualified firefighter pay doesn't increase for 15 years."

WSWS: What kind of shifts do you do?

"It's a two day two nights, over an eight-day period. Some people say we have four days off. But the first day off is following a 15-hour night. If you call sleeping a day off ... then some people say we do four-on four-off. It breaks down to a 42-hour week, which includes bank holidays and weekends."

Dave explained that due to the low wages, and spiralling cost of housing, many firefighters cannot afford to live near to their workplaces. Some have to sleep over at friends' houses during the week, or even at the fire station.

"For this station alone probably half the firemen travel in to work from outer counties," Dave said. "Tonight we have the green watch on duty. Three of them have to stay at the station during the night because they cannot get home and get back here, which is illegal, but the brigade puts up with it. They are sleeping on the floor on mats in the gym, because there is not enough resting accommodation. Every station would have firefighters that can't get back home. We are not insured to cover them."

WSWS: Are you fully manned?

Dave: "Generally the brigade is down, because in 1974

they had a big influx of firefighters. They introduced another shift. A big influx, and of course years later it all started to dissipate. They are not recruiting quickly enough. The brigades are actually down at the moment.”

WSWS: What is the reason for people leaving?

“For years we have had a magazine come out that would give the reasons for people leaving,” Dave continued. “Now we don’t see the figures anymore when people leave. We don’t now see it in black and white. We can see that most of our friends are on higher pay rates than we are. We don’t want to specify, but tube drivers are on £31,000. I spoke to a policeman the other day who was just 21 years old and on £26,000.

“We know there are much more attractive jobs. The brigade say it’s a supply and demand problem, so long as they have a thousand applicants for 50 jobs, they don’t need to give us a pay rise—which annoys us, because we have been fighting for years for a decent pay rise. We have decided this year that now is the time.

“I heard [London Mayor] Ken Livingstone on the radio saying that local councils can’t provide the necessary wage increase without putting council tax up. He believes central government should come in somewhere along the line. They want to tie [pay] in with whole review of the fire service; make it more modern.”

WSWS: What do you think of Blair’s comment about not paying you the money?

Dave: “Well there are various reviews going on with MPs. They say [Deputy Prime Minister John] Prescott’s going to be in charge. He is to be a go-between for the government and the fire brigade. There will be a strike. We are pretty sure of getting 100 percent vote, just from the feedback we get.”

WSWS: Will the strike cause personal difficulties?

“Once we are on strike we won’t get paid,” Dave added. “On my last watch, of the 12 men, three firefighters’ wives earn more than their husbands and that is increasingly the case throughout the brigade. If you are junior secretary in London you can be on £17-18,000. There are a lot of worried families out there, with childcare costs running at £3-4 an hour. We do get London Weighting [a top-allowance to offset high living costs payable to those working in London], but we get half of what the police get. In some respects we are lucky in London. We get a few thousand pounds, but if you live in Berkshire, which in some places is just as expensive as London, you get only hundreds.”

Bill is a firefighter from West London Fire Headquarters at Wembley. He told the *World Socialist*

Web Site:

“The level of pay hasn’t changed for 25 years. I am married. The shifts are not really the problem, but you have to do quite a bit of part-time work to make ends meet. The average working week is about 90 hours for most fire fighters. We have firefighters travel in from Bournemouth, Peterborough and even from Southern Ireland.”

WSWS: What do you think of Blair comments?

“All firefighters know his comments on [a pay rise] affecting the economy are complete rubbish,” Bill said. “They can afford to bail out people like Railtrack and spend another £600 million on the Millennium Dome and are prepared to go bomb Iraq at a cost of countless billions of pounds.

“The UK fire service needs £450 million to sort out this wage increase. Our employers are the local councils, but the government has seen fit to intervene. Our struggle is with the government. The government has intervened to stop the employers making a 15 percent pay deal.”

WSWS: What’s the feeling amongst the firefighters?

Bill: “The feeling is strong, nobody wants to go on strike. We would like this whole thing sorted out before any strike date, but people are fed up. Working their guts out and risking our lives, which is part of the job, we haven’t a problem with that. But we do it for measly wages. Families hardly ever see us. There are a lot of strained relationships and relationships that break up. Wages of £21,500 just don’t cut it anymore.”

WSWS: What do you think of the Blair government?

“It would seem that New Labour is not Labour at all. To be honest, the Conservatives don’t stand a chance. New Labour are more conservative than the Conservatives in terms of running down workers. They want a struggle, it would seem. It has been a bone of contention for the government, the fact we have a national fire union. It would seem this is their effort to break it.”



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