

Britain: Firefighters union calls off planned strikes as talks take place

Robert Stevens
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Last week the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) announced the suspension of the first two in a series of six planned strikes over pay. Talks are taking place with the Labour government in an attempt to avert strikes altogether. The two sides did not reach agreement by October 30, but the FBU described them as “productive”. Further talks were held the following day.

Firefighters voted to strike in order to secure a pay increase of 40 percent to bring their pay up to a base of £30,000 a year for a qualified firefighter. A series of six national strikes was planned over a period of 36 days, each lasting eight days, following an overwhelming 87.6 percent vote in favour. The union represents 50,000 firefighters and the strike would be the first national stoppage in 25 years, since the last strike in 1977.

On October 26, the FBU announced that the first two strike periods had been called off following all-day talks between the union and Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. The first strike had been scheduled to take place on October 29 for two days and the second strike from November 2 for a further two days.

FBU General Secretary Andy Gilchrist telephoned Prescott to inform him of the union’s decision, but a statement insisted that “Strike action planned for 6th November remains live”.

Prescott announced that as part of the talks he had agreed with Sir George Bain (the head of the government’s pay review body) that he would bring forward various pay and modernisation elements in a bid to end the dispute. The body was originally set to meet in mid-December.

The move to suspend the first two strikes was welcomed by Local Authority employers’ leaders and the president of the Fire Chiefs’ Association, Jeff Ord, who sensed a significant climb-down and sought to press their advantage.

Ord said of the FBU, “It could have gone a step further

and suspended strike action altogether until the independent review had been published. Hopefully we can get all the strikes suspended and move forward.” Local Authority spokesman John Ransfords said, “We are obviously very pleased that they have called off next week’s strikes which we always said were unnecessary. Our position remains the same—further progress on pay and modernisation must go hand in hand.”

Reports suggest that the existing offer to firefighters of a 4 percent pay rise will be increased to 16 percent and that a deal is being formalised that links pay increases to “modernisation” of working practices in the fire service.

The government’s response to the firefighters’ demands has been overtly hostile from the outset. Prime Minister Tony Blair set the tone for a concerted effort to ridicule the pay claim when he stated at a press conference on September 3 that it would lead to the virtual collapse of the UK economy. Blair said, “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.”

On October 21, Blair recalled the government’s national emergency body, Cobra, to coordinate emergency measures during the impending firefighters’ industrial action. The committee includes the prime minister, officials from the Ministry of Defence, the office of the deputy prime minister and other government departments. The committee has met previously over the September 11 attacks, the foot-and-mouth epidemic and the fuel protests.

Blair reiterated his hostility to the firefighters’ pay claim, insisting, “No government could yield to that without putting up people’s interest rates and their mortgage rates and causing havoc across the public sector, because other people in the public sector would say: If

they are getting 40 percent, I want 40 percent.”

Blair is articulating the central concern of the government and Britain’s ruling class. The nearly unanimous support by firefighters for a national strike in support of a pay increase indicates a widespread social discontent felt by millions of working class people towards the Labour government and its pro-big business agenda. The central policy thrust of the previous Conservative Party administrations of Margaret Thatcher and John Major was the creation of an economy based on low pay, labour flexibility and minimum restrictions in business. Over a period of two decades a systematic onslaught took place against pay and conditions. This strategy has been continued by the Labour government under Blair, which retained the raft of antiunion legislation of the previous Tory governments.

Despite government and media opposition to the firefighters’ pay claim, and the danger such a strike poses to life and property, the proposed strike met with widespread public support. There was a general consensus that firefighters are low paid and a pay increase for them would strike a blow for all the low paid—in a country where the minimum wage is set at £3.60 an hour for workers aged 18-21 and just £4.20 an hour for those over the age of 22 (£1=\$1.56 or 1.58 euros). Firefighters start on a rate of £16,941 per annum and this increases to a maximum of £21,531 after four years of service. They receive no additional pay for the shift or night work they are contracted to work. A 40 percent increase in firefighters’ pay would effectively raise their hourly rate from £6.40 to approximately £8.50.

The government has enlisted the Army—backed by a section of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force—to act as a strikebreaking force, using 827 1950s Green Goddess fire engines. The armed forces are supplemented by several thousand part-time firefighters—members of the Retained Firefighters Union (RFU). The RFU was founded in 1976 immediately prior to the last strike, with a no-strike clause in its constitution stating, “We do not believe in taking industrial action against our neighbours, families and community.”

FBU leader Andy Gilchrist is portrayed in sections of the media as an uncompromising left-winger. On October 23, the right-wing *Telegraph* newspaper depicting Bob Crow, the leader of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, and Mick Rix, the general secretary of Aslef, as closet Marxists. Speaking of the relationship between the three union leaders, the article continued, “The fire dispute could quickly spread; and while there is no direct

evidence of collaboration, union militants might relish a showdown with the Government that they feel has betrayed the labour movement.”

Gilchrist, Crow and Rix may have won high positions within the trade union bureaucracy on the basis of a growing discontent over pay and working conditions, but they operate as the left flank of the labour and trade union bureaucracy—working to ensure that social discontent doesn’t boil over and threaten Labour’s survival.

The union leaders’ problem is that the government has given them very little to work with. Last week Gilchrist complained, “We have been placed in an appalling position. All the government has to do is start genuine pay talks. It is that simple.” They have restarted talks despite the government ruling out the implementation of the 40 percent pay increase.

The Trades Union Congress has gone on record supporting the claim of the firefighters, while agreeing to establish a “contact group” aimed at finding a negotiated settlement. It has been suggested that the role of the TUC contact group, consisting of seven general secretaries and TUC General Secretary John Monks, will be to act as a conduit for the FBU to give evidence to the Bain inquiry on firefighters pay. Up to this point the FBU has opposed giving such evidence to the inquiry on the basis that the firefighters pay claim is clear cut and that an inquiry into pay is a diversion.

In a carefully worded statement released on September 5, the TUC did not say it would support industrial action, instead expressing “full support for the FBU in their campaign for a new fair pay deal in the fire service” and noting, “The FBU have made clear throughout their wish to avoid industrial action. The employers should come to the negotiating table without delay to reach a fair and just settlement so that a deeply damaging industrial dispute can be avoided.”



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