

Britain: Firefighters speak on strike

"How do you put a price on a firefighter's life?"

Our correspondent
19 November 2002

Britain's firefighters mounted their first two-day strike last week as part a planned series of strikes against the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair. They are demanding a 40 percent pay rise to bring their annual pay up to £30,000. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is in the second day of renewed talks with the government in an attempt to resolve the dispute before an eight-day strike due to begin Friday, November 22.

The FBU leadership is anxious to secure an acceptable compromise proposal to offer to their members. But the government has taken a hard-line stance with the full backing of the big business media, who do not want a precedent to be set that breaks the low pay awards of the past decade and more, particularly in the public sector.

Proof that it is the government which sought the strike—and not a supposedly hard-left leadership around FBU leader Andy Gilchrist—is the revelation that the Local Authorities were prepared to offer firefighters a 16.1 percent pay package over two years last summer, equivalent to an annual wage of £25,000, but the government refused to fund it.

In June 2001, a 24-page document was circulated to local government employers proposing 16.1 percent in three stages over two years—6.8 percent immediately, followed by 4.35 percent and then 4.2 percent.

The government was not prepared to pay for it. Instead it summoned a supposedly independent review of the fire service, under Sir George Bain, which has been used to insist on the 4 percent figure for this year, followed by a further rise of 7 percent the next year—but only if a raft of productivity and restructuring measures are also accepted.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to two firefighters during their two-day strike last week. Keith from Sheffield is a firefighter with 28 years service and Brent is a station officer who joined the service at the same time. Both participated in the last national firefighters strike in 1977.

How does the mood with the present strike compare with that in 1977?

Brent: The last strike was very difficult because it was our first ever strike. We didn't really know how to go about it. It's different this time.

Keith: In 1977 we thought it would be over before dinnertime, but we were out for nine weeks.

Brent: This time we are set for a long strike. The mood is different. The last strike wasn't as solid.

The news today is that the government has officially allowed the army troops to be able to train up on 14 fully functioning fire engines, the kind that we use every day.

Do the troops have use of these vehicles to fight fires?

Brent: No, because the ones we use are locked up behind the picket lines.

What if the government then makes attempts to appropriate them?

Brent: We don't own the fire engines. They are public property owned by the local authorities. If they want to come and get them, then they can do. What needs to be made very clear is that we are not responsible for any consequences resulting from the troops using them. They will be untrained in the use of a fully operational firefighting vehicle. They need to be properly trained.

Keith: They are opening themselves up to being sued if anything goes wrong when they are out on the job. It takes five years to become a qualified firefighter. To train to use a firefighting vehicle takes 14 weeks. The government is saying that it can train up soldiers on them in two weeks. You just can't do it.

Brent: A sub-officer of the Retained Firefighters Union [part-time firefighters who have a no-strike agreement] in Gloucester was interviewed stating that it takes two weeks to train up to use a fire engine. You may be able to familiarise yourself with firefighting equipment in two weeks, but you cannot train up.

What is your attitude to the Fire Brigades Union?

Keith: I am quite impressed by Andy Gilchrist. He's doing the rounds up and down the country. I heard today that in Edinburgh he outed the press. He didn't want them to hear his talks with the membership.

What do you think about the comments by government ministers that it was legitimate to ask whether or not the firefighters strike was aiding terrorism?

Brent: I think it's terrible. These ministers have to get their facts right on these things. What evidence have they got? The government called us criminals the other day and then had to withdraw it. How are we criminals? What am I actually doing? I'm simply withdrawing my labour.

What do you think about Bain's review on pay?

Brent: Well, we asked for consultation in May of this year regarding our pay. They waited until October before deciding to get something down. That's only a month before our pay review was due on November 7.

This is an interim report with a fuller report coming out in

December. The “modernization” that is in Bain’s report is based on re-grading, but there is no detail in it.

At present every firefighter is fully trained to do all tasks of the job. In America, you have firefighters doing just one task. For example, there is a water man who is just responsible for that. It is called specialisation. But here everyone can do all tasks. I’m confident that Keith here can do everything from driving to operating the rescue equipment. What they want to do essentially is abolish the boundaries between the counties so that one fire brigade in one area can get called out to another area. I’m not against standardisation, but this review doesn’t take into account that the different brigades in the regions presently work in different ways and have different equipment, etc.

What was gained after the last strike? What are your conditions today?

Keith: After the strike they didn’t give us money; they increased the numbers of firefighters. In 1978 there was an influx of recruits. They introduced four shifts instead of three. We used to work three 9-hour shifts on days and two 15-hour shifts. Then you had two days off and you really needed it. Today we work two days and two nights and then get four days off and it’s a lot better than the previous system.

Brent: We earn £6 an hour. This is the only job that overtime is not allowed. It’s compulsory shift work and we’ve had enough.

In what way do you think the fire service has changed in recent years?

Keith: I feel it is being run more like a business. I could get different skills and get re-graded under the new proposals and get some more money in the bank for myself. But it shouldn’t be like that.

Brent: I think the people in this country are entitled to a good fire service. About our pay, the main thing we need is a new pay formula. If I was negotiating this I would be saying, “Right now we want £30,000. How long will it take to get us to £30,000? One month, one year?” With Bain this 4 percent deal is linked with accepting everything else in the report, but we’ve already rejected 4 percent. We get that anyway. What we want is a wage that a professional fireman deserves and a new pay formula.

A victory for the firefighters in this dispute would strike a blow for all those on low pay. There is a certain truth in what Blair said—that if the firefighters get this pay increase then other workers would also demand it. What do you think?

Brent. Put this on your web site. The public sector is poorly paid. We earn £6 an hour. If someone else wants to do our job for £6 an hour they can do.

Keith: We are doing this for the younger generation. We are not going to see the benefits now. Well maybe in our pensions, but this is for the young generation. For a while the economic climate has been bad so we accepted less over the last few years with pay deals just over 1 percent. When I first started there were 24 men on a shift, now there are just 14.

What do you think about the portrayal of firefighters in the media? There was a comment this week by the Sun’s political editor describing a firefighter’s career as lucrative.

Keith: Before the strike people died in fires, but none of that was on the news. Last night three people died in the hours following

the start of the strike and it’s front-page headlines. We have got a gymnasium here and the lads play football in there from time to time. It keeps the lads fit and is good for morale. But if someone came in the station when they were playing, they would think that is all a firefighter does. And that is how the press portrays us.

What do you think about the government’s role in this dispute? It has been very confrontational right from the start, with Blair himself stating that the government will never allow such a pay increase.

Brent: Well, I’m not surprised. Labour was in government during the last strike. I think the government needs advice in the right quarters. Bain’s review is meaningless. It should take 12 months to do a proper review, not the five weeks it took Bain.

What about the prime minister’s statement that “no government on earth” could afford to meet the firefighters pay demand? Yet they are preparing for war against Iraq!

Brent: Well the war chest is always full. They found that money, no problem. The MPs also voted themselves a pay rise of 40 percent. [Deputy Prime Minister John] Prescott was at the forefront of that.

Keith: This is an MP [Prescott] who punched a member of the public.

Brent: And they (MPs) all backed him up. Prescott said that “he had bent over backwards” to negotiate with us. Well, I would like him to bend over forwards and to work as a fireman on an engine for one day and get some work done. He would see what it’s like and wouldn’t be able to move for two days. I could do his job for a day in parliament and take my wife down to the hairdressers.

Prescott was saying that he got the strike ended two weeks ago in order to continue negotiations. Well Bob Miller, a firefighter from Leicester with 25 years service, died on that day at a factory fire. If there had been a strike that day he would still be alive. How do you put a price on a firefighter’s life?



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