

The political issues raised by Britain's firefighters strike

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It should now be clear to everyone that the eight-day strike by Britain's firefighters has been deliberately provoked by the Labour government of Tony Blair.

At 9:00 a.m. on Friday, November 22, some 51,000 firefighters walked out for the second in a series of planned strikes in pursuit of a 40 percent wage rise that will bring them up to £30,000 per annum.

Even up to the last minute the supposedly hard-left leadership of the Fire Brigades Union was anxious to secure a compromise pay formula to avert the strike. But as they negotiated into the early hours before the strike deadline and the Local Authorities made two alternative offers, Labour refused to budge from its 4 percent proposal and insisted that nothing else would be funded by central government.

The chairman of the employers negotiating team, Councillor Ted George, said that although a draft agreement had been reached with the FBU on a possible 16 percent package spaced over two years, they had not been able to identify funding sources. When the last offer was made, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott refused to look at it and the government reportedly said there was no one available to consider the proposal until after the time set for the strike to begin.

The parallels are obvious between Blair's determination to take on the firefighters and Margaret Thatcher's conflict with the National Union of Mineworkers that provoked the 1984-85 year-long strike. In both cases the respective governments aimed to prove to big business that they would not back down in face of popular opposition and were prepared to "take on the militants" and "union bully boys", as the strikers are habitually referred to. Labour propaganda has also echoed Thatcher's description of the miners as the "enemy within", with its efforts to portray the firefighters strike as a threat to national security at a time when the country is on the eve of war with Iraq.

However, even Thatcher felt she could only use the army covertly to strengthen police lines. Blair has expressed his intention to go much farther. Like Prime Minister James Callaghan's Labour government in 1977, the Blair government has immediately used the army as a strikebreaking force, together with the volunteer Retained Firefighters Union (RFU) which has a no-strike clause. But it also threatened that should the eight-day strike go ahead, the armed forces could not rely on 827 ageing armed forces "Green Goddess" fire engines and might be sent across picket lines in order to use the service's fire engines. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott then raised the possibility that the right to strike would be rescinded for workers in emergency services. Attorney General Lord Goldsmith was said to be keeping under review the possibility of seeking an injunction under a 1992 trade union law drafted by the Tories limiting strikes that could endanger human life.

The last time the army was sent across picket lines was during the 1926 General Strike.

The government acts not out of strength, but out of weakness. Indeed the firefighters dispute has demonstrated the precarious position of the government.

So grave were the implications of Labour's threat to use the armed forces to cross picket lines that top military personnel publicly opposed such action being taken. Brigadier Robert Aitken, in charge of the army in Wales during the dispute, told the press, "If anyone is going to give me a better kit than I have got at the moment, through the normal democratic process, then I will have it. But I'm not going to cross picket lines."

Of greater significance was the warning made by Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, the chief of Britain's defence staff, that a continuing strike by UK firefighters would seriously undermine possible military action against Iraq. At a press conference Boyce said he was "extremely concerned" by the impact on military effectiveness of having troops used for firefighting. "I do not have a box of 19,000 [soldiers] standing by for such duties so they must come from operational duties," he said. Boyce then insisted, "The armed forces should not cross picket lines."

Boyce's warning was described by the *Times* newspaper as being close to mutiny.

The police quickly followed suit, with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) stating that its members will not cross picket lines to remove red fire engines for use by the armed forces.

The government was politically embarrassed, but has still refused to back down. The latest threat to emanate from Downing Street is to send in civilian truckers with Heavy Goods Vehicle licenses to take out red engines, under police protection, for use by the army. An unnamed minister described the government's position as "all-out war."

How does one account for such open divisions emerging within the highest echelons of the state?

The first national strike in the fire service for 25 years is more importantly the first major industrial conflict between the working class and the Blair government. It has highlighted the growing popular disaffection with the pro-business policies pursued by Labour, which have had a devastating impact on workers' livelihoods.

Paying the firefighters what they are asking, much less the smaller figure that the FBU has made clear it is prepared to accept, would hardly break the treasury. Millions of pounds have been set aside by the government to join a US-led war against Iraq. But as far as Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown are concerned, reaching even a half-way decent pay settlement with the firefighters would set a dangerous precedent.

Brown accused the firefighters of seeking an excessive claim in a time of economic uncertainty and Sir Edward George, Governor of the Bank of England, weighed in to warn that wage inflation driven by the threat of strikes could do immense damage to the economy.

Official spokesman and the media have loudly condemned the supposedly unreasonable nature of a demand for £30,000 per year. The pro-Tory press has naturally been almost hysterical in its denunciations, but the nominally liberal media agreed. The *Guardian* editorialised, "Such an increase would break the dam of pent-up demand for pay increases in the public sector and lead inevitably to catch-up claims that would exhaust

the money Gordon Brown has set aside for improving the fabric of public services.

Writing in the *Independent*, columnist David Aaronovitch was more blunt:

“Firefighters are not part of the low-pay culture. The formula by which they have been remunerated since 1978 (the one that they negotiated to end the last strike) was that firefighters should be paid in line with the upper quartile of male manual earnings, with annual increases being automatic and not having to be negotiated.... I think they have lost sight of how most people live in Britain.”

The problem for the government is that their warnings of the impact of higher wages for all on the economy play better in the City of London and amongst their well-heeled mouthpieces in the media than amongst working people. Most workers clearly welcomed the prospect of a new benchmark for pay awards.

When the firefighters determined that they would seek a living wage of £30,000, this challenged the essential thrust of economic policy of the Labour government and their Conservative predecessors—the systematic redistribution of wealth away from the working class to a narrow wealthy elite at the very top of society.

Firefighters are paid less than the mean average pay in Britain (£21,500 compared with £23,607). The price of an average home in Britain is climbing towards £130,000. The most that could be borrowed for a mortgage on a firefighters wage is around £70,000 and, like most families, they depend on a second income to survive. Women’s wages are approximately two-thirds those of men, so it is easy to do the maths regarding the living standards of firefighters. Many more workers are in the same boat—average nurse’s pay is now said to be £22,873—and many, many more are in a worse state, depending on barely sustainable levels of credit-fuelled debt to survive.

The FBU has enjoyed pointing out in response to the cries of outrage from MPs at a demand for a 40 percent pay rise that their own pay has risen by a similar percentage. But percentages only tell part of the story. MPs are paid £55,118 basic, twice the average wage, and enjoy numerous other perks worth tens of thousands. Cabinet ministers earn upwards of £124,979, while Blair is paid £171,554. Their pay formula is tied to that of the top 1 percent of civil servants, about 3,300 people, whose pay has shot up to as much as £200,000, supposedly in order to attract high-fliers from the private sector.

MPs have therefore joined the top 5 percent of earners in Britain, while Blair and his cabinet colleagues are in an even higher percentile.

In contrast, according to last year’s figures for average earnings, a bigger proportion of employees earned less than the average as compared with previous years. High pay increases for top earners pulled up the average figure, so much so that the highest paid 2.5 percent of employees could not be charted because “to include everyone the chart would stretch a further 3 metres to the right.” But the bulk of working people were paid between £12,000 and £15,000. Mean average earnings were £23,088 per year, but 63.5 percent of full-time employees earned less than this average. This compares with 62 percent in 1998 and 61 percent at the end of the 1980s—indicating the extent of income redistribution to the top earners.

It isn’t the firefighters who have “lost sight” of how most people live, but the government and its supporters. That is why, while Blair and his backers clearly view the strike as a fundamental test of the government’s authority, other sections of the establishment are worried at what may be unleashed by a frontal assault on the firefighters—particularly at a time when Britain is about to embark on a war that does not enjoy popular support.

Already, rail workers on the London Underground are refusing to work due to the threat to safety posed by the firefighters strike. London Underground has threatened that employees refusing to work will not be

paid, leading to the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union’s threat to ballot its members for strike action next week.

The government faces an enormous well of public anger, the extent of which it has not yet begun to understand. But Blair does enjoy one great advantage: whereas the government has proclaimed itself to be in an all-out war, the firefighters are led by a bureaucracy which has no such intention. It is not enough to withdraw labour for a few days in order to secure victory. This was not the case in 1977 in the firefighters strike against Callaghan and it was not the case with the miners in 1984-85.

Twenty-five years ago the firefighters were the first to oppose the IMF-inspired economic policies of the then Labour government, in a wave of industrial action that eventually culminated in the 1979 “Winter of Discontent”. But without a political perspective, the militant sentiment was dissipated and the way was paved for the election of the Thatcher government.

In 1984-85 the miners, a more powerful section of the labour movement than the FBU, were isolated by the TUC and Labour, along with the refusal of Arthur Scargill the National Union of Mineworkers to challenge this political betrayal. Over a hundred thousand lost their livelihoods.

Firefighters must draw hard lessons from these experiences. The government is waging a political struggle, using every means available to them including the courts, the police, the army and the media. In contrast, the official workers movement has done nothing to mobilise opposition against the government. John Monks, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress, speaks openly of the government going to “war” with the firefighters, but is himself desperate for peace at any price, even if this means an agreement much less than the original demand and tied to major attacks on working conditions. The TUC had its own representative on the Bain review body—the government backed commission established with the sole purpose of undermining the firefighters’ claim.

Above all else, the union bureaucracy, including the FBU, is determined to do nothing that will fundamentally challenge the political authority of the government. FBU General Secretary Andy Gilchrist is held up by the media as one of a number of newly elected union leaders with supposedly Marxist leanings. But the abiding concern of this former supporter of the Socialist Workers Party has been to insist on his loyalty to the Labour Party. He even went so far as to issue a press release to that effect.

When a group of firefighters sympathetic to the Socialist Alliance, a grouping of various left radicals, successfully placed a mealy-mouthed resolution to this year’s FBU conference calling for the “democratisation” of the union’s political fund (i.e., that some money could be donated to the Socialist Alliance), Gilchrist led the opposition.

He called on delegates to keep backing only Labour Party candidates, warning, “If we support an independent or Socialist Alliance candidate we will be flung out of the Labour Party.”

The central lesson of the firefighters’ dispute is this: It is no longer possible for workers to defend even the most basic requirement for a living wage while remaining politically tied to the very party which is seeking to impose the will of the employers. A new workers party armed with a socialist programme must now be built. This requires a political struggle not only against Labour, which openly represents the class enemy, but also against the bureaucratic misleaders of the trade unions who act as the government’s fifth column.



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