

Striking British firefighters speak out: "They want to bring us down"

Our reporters

28 November 2002

On November 22, some 51,000 firefighters began an eight-day strike in pursuit of a 40 percent wage rise to bring them up to £30,000 per annum. The walkout was deliberately provoked by the Labour government of Tony Blair, which wants to inflict a major defeat on the firefighters in order to ram through cuts in the service and to set an example to other workers that there will be no money made available for higher pay awards.

The scale of the attacks envisioned was revealed this week when Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott spoke of the possibility of shedding a fifth of all jobs in the service, which would mean more than 11,000 redundancies.

Mistrust and hostility towards the Labour government is widespread amongst the strikers. At four fire stations in Glasgow, many workers said they would never vote for them again and several more said that Labour had left the working class. There was some criticism of the TUC for not offering support.

Iain Smith, a station officer at Anniesland Road Fire Station, said, "The dispute is about pay, working conditions. We don't want strings attached to any settlement. Modernisation means cuts. Most deaths are at night and the government wants to change the shifts at night.

"We are not opposed to modernisation per se, things like greater fire safety awareness, but we are opposed to job cuts. [Deputy Prime Minister John] Prescott had a meeting with [Fire Brigades Union leader] Andy Gilchrist when he wanted to talk about community fire awareness. We are already doing that, but Prescott didn't know. It shows they don't know what they are talking about. I've lost all faith in Labour. FBU contributions go to Labour, but they're considering stopping that. Labour have an agenda for all public service workers, but they should take each claim as it

comes."

Alberto Capanni, who works from Kelvinhaugh St. Fire Station, said, "Labour are turning their backs on the principles that formed them, to help the working man. They are more interested in Middle England, keeping Middle England happy is good for votes. There is a political vacuum which here in Scotland will be filled by the Scottish Nationalist Party, whether you like them or not. I voted for the Scottish parliament, but it seems to be a bit of a joke.

"When I was growing up there used to be Communist, Labour, Tories and the Liberals. Now Labour and the Tories are the same, Liberals are nowhere. Communism didn't work, but the idea of everyone being equal is a good one."

Asked about the direction of the struggle, Alberto said, "It has been 25 years since the last pay campaign. The public should have been better prepared, more informed. We should have highlighted what 40 percent means. We are asking for a flat rate increase of £8,500. Many people do a 35-hour week, but we already do a 42-hour week."

Calumn Scott from Maryhill Fire Station said, "The government are throwing the full weight of the state against us. If they can afford hundreds of millions to bail out British Energy and money for Railtrack shareholders then they can afford to pay us."

Garry Jones, also at Maryhill, said, "If the government win it will be a disaster for the fire service and a disaster for the whole public sector."

Des Oaks from Springburn Fire Station said, "Modernisation is all about cuts. The employers and the government don't want to replace retired firefighters. They want to keep a lid on the public sector, and the firefighters' strike is a spearhead for the public sector. The fire brigade are the big scalp—they

want to bring us down.”

At Wembley Fire Station in London, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a group of firefighters who preferred to remain anonymous.

Asked how he thought the strike would develop, one firefighter said, “Obviously the government has got an agenda. They’ve sabotaged the deals twice. You can’t have it where one review last year said the fire service is the most efficient service in the country and this year it is supposed to be rubbish. There is no such thing as an independent review.”

A second striker added, “It should be an all-out strike. Both we and the government are determined, but I don’t know how we can win.”

Our reporter asked what the firefighters thought the effect of a war against Iraq would be. One responded, “If they do go to war they will either make the strike illegal or force us to go back. If they take the troops away [from providing emergency cover] and there is no fire service cover at all the public will be against us.

“Even if they send in the troops to get all the fire appliances they still won’t have enough of them trained to use them. If the army turned up here and tried to take the appliances I’d say, “Here you are then. Take them. And do you want me to train you how to use them?”

“Anyway we don’t own these appliances. The government doesn’t own them. A private company, a part of Transco called TLG, owns them. They also own our fire gear. It’s all leased for about a couple of years.

“Personally I think the government are only threatening to use the police and army to provoke a confrontation. That’s what they want. They want headlines saying firemen, police and soldiers are fighting on the picket line just so they can slag us off.

“As [Fire Brigades Union leader] Andy Gilchrist said, it is 20 pence per household per year to fund this pay rise.

Another firefighter added, “It seems that the government are making themselves richer—stashing the money away. I thought Blair blamed the previous Conservative government when he came in, but he is following in that pattern himself. It seems they want to turn us into a mini-America where you have to have insurance for everything—fire, health.

“The fat cat managers give themselves a wage rise but make the people redundant or make them work twice as hard. Until that is stopped I don’t see much

happening.”



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