

Britain: Blair declares class war against firefighters

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
29 November 2002

Britain's firefighters must consider carefully the gravity of the situation they face. The past weeks have stripped the veil from the "third way" rhetoric of Prime Minister Tony Blair and exposed Labour as a government of strike breakers in the service of big business.

In a series of public statements the government has made clear that it intends to defeat the strike by UK firefighters over pay and conditions by whatever means are deemed necessary. That was the meaning of Blair's televised press conference on November 25, in which he insisted that economic policy must be governed by corporate interests.

"If we were to concede this pay claim, the economic consequences would be dire," he warned. The government would not allow, "pay settlements that risk driving up inflation, interest rates and unemployment, and we are not going to allow the record investment in public services to be swallowed up simply in extra pay."

Blair was putting the entire working class on notice. Firefighters, he said, "are not the only public sector workers who do important jobs. Nurses do a great job, so do teachers, so do the police so, as we are seeing once again, do the Armed Forces and many of these are paid far less than fire-fighters.... I think you and I know that most public sector workers will argue that they are special case."

That the prime minister could reel off a list of low-paid workers as if this was an argument against wage rises shows how divorced his government is from the basic concerns of the mass of the population. When he departed from his prepared text he was even more imperious. Firefighters had to live "in the real world", he said. It was not a question of whether their wage was "decent" or "moral"; it was simply all they would get.

Firefighters could not and would not win their strike, he continued. Just as the miners had failed in their yearlong dispute in 1984 against Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher, so now would the firefighters. "This is 2002, not 1984. Life has changed. Those days are over. They are not coming back under any government—and certainly not this one."

"This is a different Labour government from any other," he insisted. "We are not going back to those days. I simply won't tolerate it."

Pressed on how far the government was prepared to go in order to defeat the strike, Blair pledged that the army would be given whatever it required, with "no regards to picket lines."

His threats were underscored the same day by Chancellor Gordon Brown who told the Confederation of British Industry conference, to applause, that there would be no giving in before pay demands. Brown was followed by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, who said that the jobs of 20 percent of Britain's 52,000 firefighters should be shed as part of the government's vaunted "modernisation package".

Later the Scottish Labour Party was forced to accept the resignation of Deputy Justice Minister Richard Simpson after he called striking firefighters, "fascists" and "b*****s"—"the kind of people who supported Mussolini."

It is necessary to call things by their proper name. Firefighters must understand that they are indeed dealing with a Labour government "unlike any other". To even describe the government as "Labour" is politically disorientating in that it implies a connection with the working class that no longer exists.

Ever since the days of Neil Kinnock's leadership in the mid-1980s, Labour has set out to reposition itself as the favoured party of big business. Under Blair, New Labour has succeeded in usurping the position once held by the Conservatives. Its personnel today is drawn from a narrow stratum of the upper middle class that has benefited from the gutting of social services, tax breaks and booming stock markets through the 1980s and 1990s. And its speaks for an extreme right wing elite of the super rich, whose hatred of the working class is almost pathological and who will not tolerate any opposition to their ongoing efforts to seize an ever greater share of the national wealth. All the characteristics Blair exhibits—his arrogance, his readiness to resort to force and his contempt for democratic niceties—are the universal attributes of this social layer, which is utterly indifferent to the concerns of the broad mass of the population.

It is the Rupert Murdochs of this world that Blair was speaking for in his televised speech. It is they who have told him in no uncertain terms that future patronage of his government depends on his delivering a decisive defeat to the firefighters. They are acutely conscious that the decline in firefighters' incomes is only one manifestation of the impoverishment of working people that has taken place uninterrupted for the past two decades and more.

All available social indices concerning wealth, income, housing, health, educational attainment, even life expectancy shows a widening gap between the top echelons of society and the mass of the population. The government has suppressed wages while dismantling or privatising vital social services. In the process it has imposed a raft of anti-democratic measures restricting the right of assembly, freedom of speech and political organisation.

The result is that society is more polarised along class lines than at any time in history. That is why the firefighters strike has taken on such a sharp character. The financial oligarchy that Blair represents will tolerate no limitations on its reckless efforts to accumulate ever more obscene levels of personal wealth. These forces see the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decay of the old labour movements as having liberated them from all past considerations of the need to preserve a social and political consensus. Whether in the Middle East, the US or Europe, they intend to seize the opportunity to crush all resistance to their policies and assert their undisputed hegemony.

It is no accident that Blair's press conference on the firefighters dispute coincided with his government underscoring its determination to press ahead with its support for the US-led war drive against Iraq, in defiance of international and domestic opinion. Some £1 billion of extra spending has been set aside to fund Britain's military commitment in the Persian Gulf,

despite Brown's insistence that there is no money available for decent pay agreements.

Labour's policy of class war at home and military war abroad flows inexorably from its overall perspective. In its insistence that it will not buck the international money markets, regardless of the social consequences, and its desire to maintain the so-called "special relationship" with Washington at a potential cost of tens of thousands of innocent lives in Iraq and elsewhere, Blair is setting out an agenda for a revival of British imperialism at a terrible cost to working people both here at home and the world over.

That is why Blair has opted to make the firefighters dispute his political mission statement. His intention is to reassure the criminal coterie around President Bush not only of his readiness to take part in military adventures, but to demonstrate that he is not, yet another, European social democrat who is unprepared to slash social spending, deregulate the economy and take on and defeat the working class.

Blair's chief political advantage is that the official workers' movement is led by a bureaucracy intent on sabotaging any effective struggle against the government and ensuring that the interests of the employers prevail.

That is the significance of the statement by John Monks, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), describing the confrontation between the Labour government and the firefighters as a "family row". "We all know about family rows," Monks told a TUC conference two days before the prime minister's press conference. "They are the worse kind if they are allowed to fester. They need urgent resolution."

No one who is aware of the previous record of the TUC can interpret these words as anything other than a pledge to betray the firefighters strike at the earliest opportunity.

Monks was commenting on the government's intervention the previous day to scupper a "draft pay and modernisation agreement" that he had negotiated between the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and Local Authority Employees. He complained, "The pay levels were almost precisely those set out by the deputy prime minister in his statement to the House of Commons on Thursday." The FBU would have to agree to "binding adjudication" on productivity measures and cuts or the Local Authorities could cancel the agreement. He concluded, "The employers liked it and we assumed that the government did too."

Even after Blair prevented the adoption of this shabby deal by the FBU, and so forced a strike, the TUC's main concern is to preserve the government's authority. John Edmonds of the General Municipal and Boilermakers Union, has reassured the government that the TUC would treat any agreement with the firefighters as a "special case" and would not press similar pay awards for other sections of workers.

To the extent that one can speak of "family feuds", then this is only in relation to the two wings—the Labour and trade union bureaucracy—who find themselves in a tactical disagreement. Monks and company do not represent their members, but only their own selfish interests. During Labour's first four-year term in office, the TUC worked to impose the spending targets Labour had taken over from the outgoing Tory government, enforcing pay restraint and stifling opposition to the privatisation of public services.

Monks is well aware of the anti-working class character of Blair's administration, which he has worked with so intimately. But he is making a desperate bid to sow illusions that somehow Labour can be forced to recognise the error of its ways. And if anything, the lefts within the trade unions are more determined than Monks to prevent the working class from making a political reckoning with Labour. They offer the possibility of a return to Labour's past, providing only that the party rejects Blair's heresy.

There never was a golden age of the Labour Party. It has always defended the interests of capital. The Labour Party supported wage

demands and social reforms only in order that the working class did not become convinced of the need to take up a political struggle against the profit system. Whenever the interests of big business dictated, the Labour Party and the TUC have been more than willing to openly oppose strikes and work for their defeat.

A quarter of a century ago Britain's firefighters were also on strike against a Labour government in pursuit of a 30 percent pay rise to bring them up to the average wage in industry. The Callaghan government used 10,000 army, 5,200 RAF, 4,200 Navy 1,350 Royal Marines personnel to break the strike. On the November 29, 1977, the FBU executive was summoned to 10 Downing Street and told that "for reasons of high policy" their strike would not be allowed to win. Within days the TUC Finance and General Purposes Committee met and unanimously refused to support the firemen. Finally on January 6, 1978, the FBU voted 13 to 3 to put the original employers offer with minor alterations to a recalled delegate conference. In this way the strike was ended.

Much of this will be eerily reminiscent, but things have worsened since then. In the intervening years, the trade unions have presided over an almost uninterrupted succession of defeats at the hands of the governments of Callaghan, Thatcher and Major. Now Blair has assumed responsibility for implementing a social and economic programme that Callaghan would not have dreamed possible.

If the firefighters continue to accept the perspective and leadership offered by the trade union bureaucracy, there is no possibility of defending their jobs, wages and conditions. The basic interests and democratic rights of working people are no longer compatible with the continued rule of the Blair government and the system of social and economic relations that it upholds.

The working class is faced with the urgent necessity of mounting a political struggle against the employers and their representatives, Labour and Conservative alike. Neither the firefighters, nor any other section of workers can continue to accept the domination of the workers movement by a union bureaucracy that stifles every independent initiative and seeks at all costs to preserve the economic status quo.

A willingness to take strike action and other forms of militant trade union actions will not be sufficient to overcome the forces lined up against the firefighters. Every effort must be made to break the stranglehold that the TUC is working to impose on the strike; including making direct appeals to other groups of workers to take solidarity action. But this must be conceived of as part of a broader political mobilisation of the working class against the warmongering of the Blair government and its systematic erosion of democratic rights and living standards. The character of such a struggle requires the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the new political home so urgently needed by working people.



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