

Britain: union suspends firefighters dispute

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
4 December 2002

The decision to suspend the firefighters' eight-day strike, due to start today, is an abject capitulation before the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair by the leadership of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

FBU leader Andy Gilchrist made the announcement on Monday afternoon, less than 36 hours before the strike was to begin. He claimed that the FBU had made the decision after being approached by the conciliation service ACAS to restart talks with Local Authority Employers over the firefighters demand for a 40 percent increase in their wage, to £30,000 per annum.

The talks can only produce a sell-out by the union. Any deal concocted through ACAS will be on the government's terms and at the firefighters expense. The government has intervened once already to scupper a deal between the FBU and the Local Authorities for a 16 percent pay rise, insisting that it would not fund any additional monies. In the last week Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott has said that up to 10,000 jobs must be lost in the fire service, while spokesmen let it be known that new legislation may be introduced banning firefighters from taking strike action in future. Immediately following Gilchrist's announcement of suspension, the government reiterated that there would be no pay rise above four percent unless the FBU agreed to "modernisation".

The true motives for Gilchrist's decision was indicated by his statement that the suspension proved the strike was "non-political".

The previous two days had been dominated by a barrage of hostile media coverage following his address to a rally of the Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs. The FBU leader had told the Manchester meeting that it was disgraceful for the government to say to people "who are prepared to risk their lives to save others you can't find any extra money, but you can find at least a billion [pounds] to bomb innocent men, women and children in Iraq."

The trade unions should consider whether to continue funding the Labour Party, Gilchrist said. "I'm quite prepared to work to replace New Labour with what I'm

prepared to call Real Labour," he told the rally.

His comments brought howls of outrage from the government. John Prescott accused the FBU of using the firefighters dispute for political ends. The issue was over the "kind of modern fire service the country needs", he said, not government policy towards Iraq or "the future direction of the Labour Party".

The media concurred. The *Sun* said that Gilchrist's talk of "US imperialism and working class struggles" said it all. Those who spoke in these terms are a "real threat to the stability of this country," they warned, and the government must defeat them.

The nominally liberal press joined in the chorus. The *Independent* said that "Gilchrist has really blown it now". Not only was he foolish to speak of a political fight against Blair, but his remarks linking opposition to war against Iraq with concerns for the fate of working people were unforgivable. "*The Independent* does not support a war in Iraq, but the argument that any money spent fighting such a war would be better spent on public service at home has nothing to do with it."

The media insisted that the government must not retreat and should go for the jugular. Writing in the *Independent*, Bruce Anderson threatened the FBU with union busting and mass sackings. "It may be, indeed, that in order to win the firemen's strike, the Government will have to find itself a new set of firemen, after treating the strikers in the same way that President Reagan treated the striking US air traffic controllers at the beginning of the Eighties: he fired the lot."

Gilchrist's remarks, and the ensuing furore, intensified the ongoing efforts by the trade union bureaucracy to bring an end to the strike. He will have been told in no uncertain terms by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) that he had crossed the line and the dispute would be strangled if he didn't do as he was told. TUC General Secretary John Monks told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, "From my perspective, I could see that the dispute was getting too political." The TUC had been instrumental in setting the ACAS talks because it was necessary to get

“breathing space” to solve a “very difficult situation”, Monks said.

Within hours of his speech, Gilchrist was back pedalling like mad. “I fundamentally refute that what I am about or what the union is about is wrecking Mr Blair’s career. I don’t want to and I have no plan to do so. This is not a political strike. It is a simple dispute about firefighters’ pay,” he said.

Whatever initial resistance to talks with ACAS may have existed amongst the FBU Executive had evaporated by Monday afternoon. Not only Gilchrist but a number of other supposed lefts were by now singing from the same hymn sheet as Monks. Derek Simpson, newly elected general secretary of the Amicus manufacturing union, insisted, “The only people who have introduced politics into this dispute are those elements of New Labour who revile trade unions... Is anyone in Downing Street seriously suggesting that the firefighters are trying to overthrow the government? If they are, we should tell them not to be so bleeding thick.”

The FBU has done its best to put a brave face on things, insisting that there is still the possibility of the eight-day strike planned for December 16 going ahead if negotiations fail. This can not disguise the fact that it has ceded the battle to Blair, after facing a few verbal cannonades.

As a result the livelihoods of thousands of firefighters have been imperilled and the government’s hand has been strengthened in pressing ahead with its plans for sweeping changes throughout the public sector. Moreover, the FBU has smoothed the way for the government to speed up its preparations for war in the Middle East.

The firefighters dispute is by no means over, and there is every indication that it is the harbinger of other major struggles by the working class against the Blair government. At the very least, the strike has demonstrated the deep hostility felt by many workers towards the Labour government.

But politically the working class is not prepared for what lies ahead.

Essential lessons must be drawn from the ignominious retreat by the FBU. It cannot be dismissed as merely an example of individual cowardice or treachery.

Gilchrist and a number of other recently elected trade union leaders have achieved a degree of popular support by claiming to represent an alternative to New Labour. However, whilst they may criticise aspects of government policy—particularly Blair’s efforts to distance his government from the trade unions—they are opposed to

any political break with the Labour Party. Instead they offer the possibility that popular pressure will force the government to change course and return the party to its reformist roots.

In practice the invocation of “Real Labour” means the subordination of the working class to *actual* Labour and to the trade union bureaucracy.

Whatever it is labelled—Real Labour, Old Labour, Traditional Labour, etc.—the perspective being advanced is one based on an acceptance of the existing social order and piecemeal efforts to extract concessions from big business and the government. Any struggle that threatens to break out of these narrow confines, and threatens the more fundamental interests of capital, is anathema to a bureaucracy whose privileges are based on their role as industrial policemen.

That is why the trade union bureaucracy insists that the government has a monopoly on pursuing a political struggle against the firefighters. When faced with the possibility of the dispute unleashing the well of pent-up bitterness and anger in the working class, the TUC insisted the FBU threw in the towel. It will take precisely the same attitude to other workers’ struggles.

British workers have come to the end of the road with the old organisations and the perspective on which Labourism has been based. A new socialist party is required that does pursue the class struggle with a definite political end in mind: the abolition of the profit system and the reorganisation of society to meet the needs of working people.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact