

Britain: firefighters demonstration used as PR event for union bureaucracy

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The demonstration through London on Saturday December 7 was nominally in support of Britain's firefighters and their campaign for a 40 percent wage increase to £30,000 per annum. In the event, however, it was transformed into a public relations exercise aimed at boosting the credentials of the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

The march and rally was organised prior to the December 2 decision by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) executive to suspend the eight-day strike, due to begin two days later, and enter talks with the conciliation service ACAS.

This meant that instead of many of country's 50,000 firefighters participating in the demonstration and providing a focus for the widespread support amongst working people for their cause, just 10,000 people attended, mainly firefighters with small delegations of workers in other unions and a host of left radical groups.

Although behind the scenes the TUC had done its utmost to limit participation—downgrading the national demonstration to a mainly London event—publicly it tried to proceed as if nothing had changed. Reports of numbers were inflated and football horns were distributed in order to make the maximum noise. It was even billed as the largest labour movement demonstration since the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) "Save the Pits" campaign more than a decade ago—somewhat disingenuously given that the largest protest during that campaign mobilised well over 100,000 people.

Far from expressing popular opposition to the Blair Labour government and its efforts to smash the firefighters strike, the demonstration was carefully stagemanaged for the benefit of the media and virtually any hint of political controversy expunged.

The TUC's website led with a press release informing the media of the numerous photo opportunities that would be presented, including the chance to take pictures of

TUC General Secretary John Monks at the side of FBU leader Andy Gilchrist.

When the march arrived at Hyde Park, the stage was flanked with a billboard size display announcing the names of the featured speakers. Leading off proceedings Monks set the tone with a series of platitudes and inanities. He began with obscure references to the Great Fire of London (1666) and the Nazi bombing blitz during the Second World War, in order to explain how hazardous firefighting was.

His speech closed after barely five minutes with an appeal for firefighters to accept the TUC's leadership and to strive for compromise with Labour and the Local Authority employers. "You are giving peace a chance, now let's call on the government, let's call on the employers today to give peace a chance too, and next week at ACAS to come forward with a decent offer that gives fair pay for firefighters and fire control staff."

No other trade union leader who spoke acquitted themselves better than Monks. Dave Prentiss, General Secretary of the local government workers union, UNISON, spoke of three million public sector workers willing to work with government to improve public services and criticised the government for sabotaging a 16 percent pay deal, spread over three years, that had almost been agreed between the TUC, FBU and Local Authorities.

John Edmonds of the general union, GMB, limited himself to football terrace style chants of "What do you want?—Fair Pay", whilst newly elected TUC President Nigel de Gruchy, wished every success to the ACAS talks. This is despite the government insisting that it will not release any additional funds to settle the dispute, and demanding that any pay agreement is tied in with the loss of thousands of jobs.

Prior to the decision to suspend the strike, Gilchrist had been attacked by the media and the government for

statements pledging opposition to “New Labour” and his desire to replace it with “Real Labour”. Within less than 48 hours, he had been instructed by the TUC to shut up, suspend the strike and go to ACAS.

In his speech to the rally, Gilchrist made only a fleeting reference to the media attacks, stating that “when politicians suggest that they might want to get rid of 10,000 firefighters we have every right to get involved in politics”. He described the consistent efforts by the government to prevent an agreement being reached as “incompetence” and threatened further strike action if the government prevented a deal at ACAS.

His words had a hollow ring, given that the people in the forefront of efforts to sell-out the firefighters dispute stood alongside him and were hailed as friends.

From day one, the TUC has sought to ensure that the firefighters dispute did not become a focus for political opposition to the Blair government. Its sole concern is that government’s plans to privatise and dismantle public services should proceed with their active participation. Fearful of being sidelined, the TUC has merely on occasion depicted itself as the conscience of the Blair government, an “akward squad” seeking to put it back on the correct course.

The rally acted not as a spur to opposition sentiment, but a soporific. It is not the first time that the TUC has been invited onto the platform of a group of workers it is intent on betraying. One recalls during the 1984/85 miners strike the spectacle of then-TUC General Secretary Norman Willis, speaking at a miners’ gala. At that event, some miners dangled a noose over Willis’ head to loud applause. At Saturday’s rally in contrast, a diplomatic silence was imposed.

The FBU was assisted in this task by the radical groups organised around the Socialist Alliance. Notwithstanding their somewhat muted criticism of Monks and the rightwing, the radicals insist that the trade unions are the only vehicle through which the class struggle can be waged. They seek only to convince the trade union leaders of the need to pursue a more left-wing course and to divert part of the trade union political fund currently used to finance Labour their way.

The Socialist Workers Party argued that funding the Socialist Alliance would “provide the core of counter-pressure on union leaders not to blunt opposition to the government and the employers”.

The Socialist Party was even more explicit in its orientation to the trade union lefts, arguing for the unions’ political funds to be “used to finance alternative

candidates and parties in elections, whose *policies correspond with those of the unions*” (emphasis added).

To the extent that the rightwing is discredited, the radicals respond by seeking to cultivate illusions that the elevation of a few left demagogues into leading positions will somehow renew the unions. The Socialist Party argues, for example, “If, after this dispute, the FBU was to approach the newly elected left leaders in unions such as the RMT, CWU, PCS, ASLEF etc about organising a cross-union rank and file conference to discuss what concrete steps could be taken now to build a new political alternative, it would be a huge step forward for working-class people.”

Gilchrist and others who have been elected recently may have won support because they criticise Blair’s worst excesses, but they have repeatedly affirmed their loyalty to Labour and the TUC General Council. Gilchrist himself led a campaign to preserve the FBU’s political fund for the sole use of the Labour Party, and has proved his willingness to suppress any indication of opposition within the FBU. On the morning of the demonstration several newspapers carried reports that Bob Pounder had been suspended from his post as FBU secretary in Greater Manchester for describing the decision to suspend strike action as a “sell-out”. Pounder’s mobile phone and personal computer were repossessed by the union, and he was made to hand over keys to his union office. The FBU has said that he is now “on leave” until the start of 2003.

Contrary to the radicals attempts to peddle illusions in the trade unions, Saturday’s rally confirmed that if the firefighters dispute remains under the control of the TUC and FBU it will be led to defeat. Everything depends on the development of a rank-and-file rebellion against the pro-business policies of the government and the trade union bureaucracy.



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