

# Britain: Firefighters to resume nationwide strike

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Britain's firefighters are to resume their nationwide strike—suspended in December to allow further talks with local authority employers through the conciliation service Acas.

On January 10, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) announced the latest talks had failed and said a special delegate meeting of the union had scheduled a 24-hour strike stoppage on January 21. This is to be followed by two 48-hour strikes on January 28 and February 1.

The FBU is campaigning for a fully qualified firefighters' basic wage to be increased by 40 percent from £21,500 to £30,000. During the course of the dispute last year, however, it indicated it would be prepared to settle for 16 percent.

Local authorities which employ firefighters have rejected any increase above 11 percent. It also stipulated that even this is dependent on the union accepting the government commissioned review of the fire service, the Bain Review, which called for life-threatening cuts to be made in staffing levels and facilities to save money.

The FBU has said that the government had worked behind the scenes to prevent any agreement favourable to the firefighters, with Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott telling employers they should offer only a 4 percent rise immediately, and a further 7 percent once cut backs had been agreed.

The FBU said the employers' latest offer was "derisory", non-negotiable and would lead to job cuts. But it agreed to hold further talks with employers at Acas on January 20 to explore options. Charles Nolda, chief negotiator of the local authority employers, has insisted that they remain committed to implementing the cuts, which he said included a reduction in night cover at certain stations.

With the UK fully signed up to preparations for a US-

led war against Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair has refused to rule out taking legal action to prevent the strike. Asked during a press conference on January 13 whether his government was preparing emergency legislation against the union, the prime minister said it would "keep every option under review". He went on to condemn the planned strikes as "totally wrong, dangerous and unjustified".

During last year's strikes the government mobilised 19,000 members of the armed forces to provide emergency fire cover. Representing some 17 percent of the army's manpower, the prospect of troops being mobilised once again in a firefighters dispute is directly affecting the government's plans for war.

It was revealed this week that 1,000 members of the 16 Air Assault Brigade which were scheduled to transfer from firefighting duties and travel to the Middle East, have been told to remain put following the FBU's announcement. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) insisted, however, that they would be cleared for the Gulf within a fortnight, when their firefighting duties are taken over by the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy. "Training someone to hold a hose only takes a day or two," a government spokesman said disparagingly.

Fire Minister Nick Raynsford said that troops had undergone further training since the last fire strike in December and that a "substantial number" of modern red engines would be available for the army to use.

On January 16, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown reiterated that the government would not accept any significant pay increases in the public sector. In an interview with the *Times* newspaper he insisted that there must be "discipline in public sector pay." With pay reviews due for members of the armed forces, teachers, prison officers, senior civil servants

and the judiciary in the near future, the government's hardline against the firefighters is intended as a warning to all public sector employees.



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