

Britain: Labour government threatens ban on UK firefighters strike

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The nationwide firefighters dispute continued this week, with workers holding a 48-hour strike between January 28-30. The latest strike followed the failure of negotiations between the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and local authority employers.

Firefighters are calling for a 40 percent increase in pay to bring their wage levels to £30,000 per annum. The local authority employers, at government insistence, have rejected this demand and offered just 11 percent over two years. Even this is to be tied in with firefighters agreeing to thousands of job cuts and the closure of stations.

As the firefighters began their latest walkout, the government announced it was preparing to take measures to forcibly end the strike and impose a pay settlement. In parliament, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott announced that provisions in the 1947 Fire Services Act, which were repealed in 1959, will be reactivated in order to allow the government to specify pay, terms and conditions in the fire service. At the same time Prescott condemned the FBU, claiming that it was opposed to “modernisation”, the government’s euphemism for sweeping cuts.

Prescott said, “As a matter of priority, I will introduce legislation in the public interest to take new powers of direction over the fire service,” so as to bring a “new and much needed sense of reality” into future negotiations.

He said that the new legislation would also be used to direct the fire service on the use of its facilities and assets in the dispute. This is aimed at preventing firefighters from picketing stations, and hanging banners backing their pay claim from the buildings.

The announcement reveals the full extent of the governmental crisis that the firefighters strike has produced. The strike is taking place at the same time as

the Blair government is mobilising its armed forces for war with Iraq in the Persian Gulf but some 19,000 army, navy and air force troops are presently needed to cover for striking firefighters—17 percent of the total armed forces.

The government was clearly shocked by the latest strike. It has proceeded on the basis that war with Iraq is imminent and that it would be able to rely on patriotism and public opposition to the strike in order to get it off the agenda. So confident of this has the government been that it has refused to make any improvement on the original pay offer presented by employers.

But the impending war against Iraq is not supported by the majority of the population in Britain and, despite a witch-hunt by sections of the media aimed at whipping up hostility by accusing firefighters of “aiding” Saddam Hussein, the government has not been able to win support on this issue.

The Conservatives demanded even harsher measures against the strike calling on the government to send in police to break picket lines and seize equipment. In announcing its decision to impose a settlement, the government aims to satisfy big business that it is prepared to act tough, whilst avoiding the scale of confrontation the Conservatives’ proposal would inevitably unleash. It hopes that its threat will be enough to force the FBU to call off the strikes scheduled for the end of this month, enabling the government to concentrate on finalising its war preparations.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has made it plain that despite the implications of the government’s threatened settlement, it is also keen to get the strike off the agenda. TUC general secretary elect, Brendan Barber, said he would meet the FBU over the next few

days in order to bring about a resumption of negotiations.

However, Prescott's announcement caused outrage amongst firefighters who have insisted they will not be forced back to work. Even if the FBU wanted to, it is by no means clear that they will be able to end the dispute, such is the feelings of anger and hostility amongst many of its members. This means that if the government proceeds with imposing a pay settlement, it may still have to resort to the police to carry it through.



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