

Fire Brigades Union capitulates to South Yorkshire management

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With just two hours to go before the next in a series of strikes by South Yorkshire firefighters, the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) capitulated to management demands and called off the stoppages.

Firefighters were scheduled to begin their walkout at 18:00 on November 4 when the FBU called off the action, because the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (SYFRA) agreed to take negotiations to the conciliation service ACAS.

The full details of what the FBU have offered the SYFRA to persuade it to agree to negotiations at ACAS remains unclear. But on the eve of the last of a series of ongoing strikes, the SYFRA announced that “A very positive meeting has been held between South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue managers and senior FBU officials. In the meeting, the FBU put forward a proposal which has the potential to end the current dispute”.

The start time of the stoppage was initially put back by two hours by the FBU, to give management a chance to reach agreement. The action was ultimately abandoned altogether, when management accepted the proposal.

If the FBU’s press release and news coverage is taken at face value, the union has not modified its negotiating position: offering to take negotiations to ACAS, offering a 10-hour day and 14-hour night shift pattern, and asking SYFRA to drop its threat to sack all the region’s firefighters and re-employ them on new contracts.

It cannot be ruled out, however, that the FBU has offered more. The union itself, with the support of various pseudo-radical groups, have claimed that SYFRA’s agreement to go to ACAS is a victory. Acting in their capacity as the defenders of the trade

union bureaucracy, the Socialist Workers Party claimed that SYFRA had buckled under enormous pressure from the strike and had been forced to offer concessions.

There is no doubt that the firefighters action attracted broad sympathy. In response, SYFRA had become ever more belligerent, threatening an effective lock out at the start of the week. Firefighters, it said, participating in a series of short stoppages—running in addition to the days of action—would not be paid for any shift within which a strike occurred.

SYFRA told firefighters they could turn up for work in a “voluntary capacity”, but would not be entitled to any pay. This measure was legitimised by management with the absurd rationale that keeping firefighters away from work was required to “maximise safety”.

It was under such conditions that the FBU retreated and sued for peace.

Although the shift pattern that now appears to be agreed upon is not the one originally pushed for by SYFRA—four consecutive 12-hour shifts—it is an abandonment of the existing rotation (two 9-hour day shifts, followed by two 15-hour night shifts).

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The FBU took the first possible opportunity to close down the dispute with the utmost haste. Against the background of the national postal strike and with a strike in South Yorkshire by bus drivers, the union was determined to bring the dispute to a close at its members’ expense.

More broadly, the government faces a wave of strikes, especially in the public sector. And in London last weekend, a mass rally of firefighters was held against plans to reduce the number of workers who answer emergency calls in the south-east from 120 to

just eight.

Acting on behalf of the ruling elite to police the working class, the union bureaucracies are highly sensitive to any dispute that threatens to go beyond what they call “realistic demands”. Binding arbitration by ACAS is not a victory for firefighters. It is tactic the FBU leadership has chosen to capitulate to the demands of management. Moreover, the threat of mass sackings still hangs over the firefighters’ heads.

Martin McCarthy, head of policy and performance at SYFRA, declared, “All industrial action has been suspended forthwith and once appropriate terms of engagement for ACAS have been agreed, the authority will agree to the FBU’s request to cancel the dismissal/re-engagement proces in return for the cessation of any further industrial action connected to the dispute”.

South Yorkshire’s Chief Fire Officer Mark Smitherman summed up the significance of the FBU’s move. Once the strikes were called off he announced to the local press, “The FBU have shown today that they accept changes for the benefit of public and firefighter safety and that is an important step. Change is inevitable over the coming years”.



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