

British fire service faces downsizing and privatisation

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The Labour government in Britain is imposing budget cuts in the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) that will result in hundreds of job losses and compromise public safety.

The Audit Commission, the unelected body used by the central government to impose market-based discipline on public spending, claims that £200 million of savings can be made through efficiency improvements at local level without endangering the public. But there were already £200 million worth of cuts made between 2004 and 2008. Further cuts, therefore, must mean major job losses for firefighters.

This takes place at a time when the number of reported commercial and domestic fires is on the increase. According to the Audit Commission, “People on the lowest income and living alone are more likely to experience a fire and to die or suffer injuries as a result. Factors such as smoking, poor health, disability and poor housing raise the risk. The government estimates that 30 percent of those that die in fires are people with limited mobility.”

Local fire authorities are in the process of major downsizing involving the reduction of personnel, equipment and fire stations:

- Warwickshire FRS is imposing the largest cuts and closure plan ever undertaken by a fire service. A third of all fire appliances are to be cut and seven fire stations are slated for closure. Approximately 100 retained firefighters (part-time firefighters on call) are to be axed and the equipment they manned removed.
- One in eight firemen’s posts are under threat in Lancashire.
- In Essex one in 10 frontline jobs are under threat by the move to “switch crewing”, which will mean an end to dedicated crews for particular rescue equipment and appliances so that lifesaving equipment will not be available on a 24-hour basis.
- In Cleveland there are plans to cut fire crews at Billingham fire station in the centre of one of Europe’s largest petrochemical industrial sites. The fire authority intends to cut one fire engine, reducing the station to one-pump with the loss of 22 frontline staff. There are storage facilities in

the locality with 100 times the capacity of the largest storage tanks at Buncefield oil refinery, which went up in smoke in 2005 in the largest peacetime explosion in Europe.

As is the case throughout the public sector, changes of a socially regressive nature are presented as “modernisation.” An overstretched workforce will be expected to work longer hours. Fire authorities are seeking to use a change in shift patterns and a reduction in night time cover to eliminate jobs. Lancashire FRS intends to introduce an 84-hour week. In South Yorkshire the fire authority threatened to sack all frontline firefighters who refused to sign new contracts involving a change of shift patterns.

A major downsizing of support staff in Emergency Fire Control rooms is planned under the government’s Fire Control Project. The number of control rooms in England is presently 46, but this will be reduced to just nine regional rather than local sites. The scale of the job losses can be gauged by figures released in 2008 for the South West region, which envisaged a reduction in staffing levels from 175 to 63.

Fire control workers take 999 calls from the public and co-ordinate the response of fire crews. They are currently integrated into the local fire brigades and are conversant with the area, personnel and equipment in fire stations, which assists in determining an effective response. The new technology being introduced through the Fire Control Project cannot provide a substitute for well-trained and properly staffed control rooms. Official claims that the call handling capacity will not be undermined are contradicted by changes introduced by government in 2008, giving authorisation for 999 telecom operators to filter and queue calls to the fire service during busy times.

The Fire Control Project was drawn up in 2004 and was due for completion by 2007 at a cost of £100 million. The rescheduled date for completion is now 2012 and a recent estimate put the total cost at approximately £1.4 billion. How the bill is to be divided up has yet to be agreed, but the inflated costs will impact on council tax for the public and produce a further squeeze on funding for the fire service.

Consultants, meanwhile, have clocked up fees of around £40 million.

While cuts are the order of the day for firemen and the general public, the government has continued to provide lucrative contracts to the private sector. Building and maintaining fire service infrastructure and equipment takes place under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme, which is then leased back by the government. Labour extended this Conservative policy to the FRS in 1998.

In the first deal of its kind—agreed last July—a private company has now been awarded a contract to provide frontline firefighters. The London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) awarded a five-year contract worth £12 million to AssetCo to provide 700 back-up firemen. AssetCo already owns, maintains and manages the operational availability of all the front-line fire and rescue vehicles and operational equipment used at in London and Lincolnshire.

The deal is viewed as a precedent to be followed by other LRAs nationally. Lincolnshire FRS will provide only basic training to this makeshift force, which will only be seconded by AssetCo from a private security firm, Reliance, on a temporary basis according to the *Financial Times*. The intention of this move is unmistakable. The *London Evening Standard* headline stated, “£9 million for 700 reserve strike-busting firefighters.”

The company itself stated, “This is the first major contract of its nature to be awarded by a UK Fire and Rescue Service, reflecting the increasing role Fire and Rescue Authorities have in securing their own business continuity arrangements without reliance upon the support of the Ministry of Defence (MoD).”

Since 2004 the local fire authorities have been required to provide contingency plans that were not reliant upon use of the Army. The Army was used to break the 2003-04 national firefighters’ strike. The timing of the PFI deal coincided with London firemen being balloted for a strike and industrial action taking place up and down the country. Between August and October one in five members of the Fire Brigade Union were involved in some kind of industrial action.

The AssetCo deal is the first step in creating a privatised strike-breaking force. Brian Coleman, LFEPA chief, claimed that AssetCo would provide 27 appliances, “fully crewed, fully trained to professional standards, to keep at least some cover should there be a strike or a flu pandemic or any other reason why a sizeable number of our firefighters can’t or won’t come to work.”

These drastic cuts in spending in the Fire and Rescue Service occur under conditions where the Association of British Insurers estimates that fire damage losses to

commercial properties and homes hit record levels of £ 1.3 billion last year. According to the FBU, rescues (just from fire and road traffic collisions) are running at almost 17,000 people a year. This figure excludes many other rescues during floods and other incidents.

The fire service is struggling to cope due to previous job losses. Between 1999 and 2008 the number of full time firemen was reduced in England by 1,100, to 30,824. Nine stations have been closed while only three have been built. The FBU states that Greater Manchester has lost one in four firemen since 2002.

Cuts have led to a sharp increase in the deaths of firefighters. The FBU says eight died at work in 2007, the highest rate for 30 years. Four of these died tackling a warehouse fire at Atherstone-On-Stour, Warwickshire. A further 13 firefighters were killed at fires from 2003-2006. For almost seven years before 2007 there were no firefighter deaths on duty. An FBU report into firefighter deaths cites among several causes insufficient training for emergency response and inadequate crew levels linked with the spending cuts.

The FBU does not oppose all cuts on principle, but limits its objection to aspects of the government’s plans it states are not cost effective. Throughout the past year, opposition to the break-up of national terms and conditions, job losses and shift changes has been confined by the FBU to a series of separate and local disputes. In South Yorkshire it called off the strike against the imposition of new shift patterns under conditions in which its members had been threatened with having their employment terminated. In the face of such blatant intimidation, the FBU signalled that it was prepared to give up the original shift patterns in exchange for binding arbitration. This cave-in will have been noted by LRAs around the country seeking to impose similar attacks.



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