

South Yorkshire firefighters strike against threats of mass dismissal

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22 January 2010

The Fire Brigade Union (FBU) has been forced to call a fresh series of strikes after its members voted to reject a compromise on shift patterns the union leadership had accepted in order to end a previous stoppage.

Management of the South Yorkshire Fire Rescue Authority (SYFRA) has responded by reasserting its original demands—imposing new shift patterns—and threatening to sack anyone who fails to accept them. The SYFRA not only want to alter working times for firefighters, but also to change the start and finish times of shifts, rest breaks and work routines.

South Yorkshire firefighters are to strike for a total of ten days. The FBU announced a 48-hour stoppage last week, giving SYFRA management until 4pm on January 18 to withdraw their threat to sack firefighters who refuse to sign the new contracts. When SYFRA maintained their threat against the 744 strong workforce, the FBU was forced to announce a further eight days of stoppages. The first stoppage is due to begin on Sunday January 24 at 9am, and finish at 9am on January 25. In the meantime, without an agreement the eight day strikes will run from 9am January 27 until 9pm February 4.

Rank and file firefighters understand that if they accept the new shift patterns, this will be followed by more fundamental cuts and changes. Nationally the Labour government is imposing large budget cuts on the Fire and Rescue Service and South Yorkshire will have to impose its share. The planned £200 million in cuts come on top of similar savings made between 2004 and 2008 and will guarantee job cuts.

In November last year, the FBU leadership stitched

up a hasty deal with the SYFRA, the exact terms of which were not made public. With just a couple of hours to go before South Yorkshire firefighters were due to walk out on strike, the leadership suspended the action, then abandoned it altogether when they claimed they had an agreement with the SYFRA. At the time the FBU leadership said that a long term deal over changes in shift hours could be agreed.

The FBU offered a change from four consecutive 12 hour shifts to two 10-hour days, followed by two 14-hour night time shifts. This was accepted by management. With a national postal workers strike underway, and South Yorkshire bus drivers and others locally also on strike, the FBU was anxious to prevent its members making common cause with other sections.

Now, with the workforce having rejected the proposed deal, the previous ballot in favour of action remains “live” and no further ballot is required. However, anti-union laws dictate the FBU must still give seven days notice to take strike action.

The dispute has now been running for 18 months and firefighters have previously walked out seven times, enraging management. Mark Smitherman, the chief fire officer in South Yorkshire, threatened firefighters. “Considering all the job losses and pay cuts being implemented elsewhere across South Yorkshire and the UK, I would urge the FBU to get into the real world,” he declared.

The SYFRA has already sacked one firefighter who allegedly made abusive comments about strike breakers on a social networking website. The as yet unnamed worker was fired for gross misconduct for breaching

the SYFRA Social Media Policy.

“There has been a firefighter fired because of the comments he has made on Facebook,” the FBU’s Graham Wilkinson told the local press. “He thought it was a private conversation between him and friends. He made the comments using his mobile phone and thought his privacy was set to friends only. Somebody has printed it off the computer and showed it to management and they’ve decided to discipline him over it. We see this as management harassing and intimidating firefighters purely because of the strike action.”

Six other firefighters also face disciplinary action for comments made on the Facebook website.

The critical issue remains the building of a socialist political strategy. Unless workers organise their strike independently and break from the FBU’s stranglehold, the union will once again come to a settlement detrimental to its members. The FBU leadership has repeatedly stated that it is not in principle opposed to cuts in the fire service, only to those which are not “cost effective”.



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