

All London firefighters threatened with being sacked

Zach Reed
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Firefighters have voted in favour of industrial action in opposition to a new contract in London. The contract would take three hours off the nightshift, leaving the capital short of fire cover and the population at risk, as exhausted firefighters became less effective. Most fire deaths occur in the early hours of the morning, when emergency cover would be reduced under the new contract.

London Fire Brigade Commissioner Ron Dobson insisted that unless they accept the new shift patterns, all London firefighters will be sacked. The sackings can take place under section 188 of the 1992 Trade Union and Labour Relations Act, which allows management to impose a 90-day “consultation period”. That countdown began on August 11, when a letter went out to all firefighters.

The new shift patterns would see the current two 9-hour day shifts and two 15-hour night shifts changed for four consecutive 12-hour shifts, by taking three hours off the night shift and adding these to the day shift. Although at the moment there is no official cut to pay, hours or jobs, the changes include a drive to increase productivity by removing the rest period included in the nightshift and increasing the work-load during the day.

A leaked management document reveals that the new shift changes are only a prelude to drastic cuts to the fire service that will be announced as part of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government’s austerity budget. The document notes that making the night and day shifts of an equal length will allow the transfer of personnel from night shifts to day shifts, a reduction in the number of fire engines by 10 and even the closure of fire stations during the night.

The actions of the London Fire Brigade follow the introduction of a similar shift pattern by the South Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service. The threat of mass sackings was also used there. Underlying these

contractual changes are the two rounds of £200 million cuts that were imposed on the fire service nationally under the Labour government. The first took place from 2004 to 2008, and another was unveiled at the beginning of 2010 just before Labour lost office.

Added to the Labour cuts are the plans of the new coalition government to slash public spending in its October spending review. They are likely to dwarf the previous cuts and will be imposed on fire services that have already been stripped to the bone. The result of this further round of cuts will be major downsizing, massive job losses and seriously over-stretched emergency services.

The South Yorkshire fire service has made £4 million of savings since it introduced the new shift patterns in March 2010. But the local authority acknowledges that the savings fall well short of what it must achieve even under the existing Labour cuts. Further measures will be needed to satisfy the demands of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government.

Job losses are threatened in other regions. It is reported that 150 firefighters face the sack in Manchester. Essex firefighters are to take industrial action on September 20 in response to cuts to frontline services. Fire and rescue services in Essex have already experienced 44 job losses since 2009, resulting in an inadequate provision of specialist emergency personnel. Previous action in Essex began in September 2009 and ended April this year after a resumption of talks.

A major offensive against the fire service is under way nationwide. The coalition government has started an urgent review of local fire authorities. It claims that 58 fire authorities are in violation of the Civil Contingencies Act, which requires all authorities to possess the resources necessary for a major event. The government’s concern is that in the event of local industrial action it would not be possible to draw on neighbouring fire and rescue services

to break such strikes. In previous fire strikes, the army has been called in to act as strike-breakers. But with the army overstretched in Afghanistan, that would not be possible.

Instead, management are looking to private companies to provide cover. The London Fire Brigade has arranged a £12 million deal with AssetCo. The company is to provide 700 privately trained and hired firefighters. Many of them will be ex-army personnel. Although London is the only authority to have arranged such a deal at present, others are involved in discussions with private companies. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough authorities are said to be well advanced in their plans to bring in private strike-breakers. The move reflects the government's plan to force all local authorities to put services out to tender with private companies.

The vote by London firefighters shows that there is a strong support for a campaign against the new contract and any downgrading of the fire service. Public support for the firefighters is high. A YouGov poll recently reported that 90 percent of the public oppose cuts to the fire service. But the main obstacle to a successful struggle against the cuts is the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack, claims to "fight all the way". He is regarded as one of the most militant trade union leaders and widely praised by middle class political groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party. But the FBU under his leadership does not oppose the cuts in principle. It has participated in talks to introduce the new shifts. Talks have been going on in London for the last five years. The FBU only opposes cuts it does not regard as cost-effective. It shares the same outlook as the local authorities and management and believes that compromise is possible. The union's main complaint in London is that management have acted unilaterally and jeopardised the negotiations.

Wrack has written in the *Guardian* about a nationwide offensive against the firefighters. But the union he heads still claims that each dispute is local and has refused to mount a national campaign. The union claims that the threat to sack the London firefighters en masse is the result of the desire of Conservative councillor Brian Coleman to pick a fight. The FBU claims that Coleman is merely using the threat of government spending cuts as a pretext for the sackings. This effectively isolates the attempts of the firefighters to save their jobs and the fire service from the struggles of other sections of the working class against the spending cuts.

On this basis the FBU is able to claim it is only taking action against the sackings. It can still call for fresh talks to negotiate the shift changes. This was the tactic it used in South Yorkshire. The FBU's acceptance of new shifts in South Yorkshire has encouraged the London Fire Brigade to press ahead with its threat of dismissal.

The FBU insists that industrial action is the "last resort". It was forced to call a ballot in London because of the anger of its members. But the action is deliberately limited and stops short of a strike, despite the fact that the job of every London firefighter is under threat.

The union allowed nine days for management to retract the threat of mass sackings and return to talks before the ballot was held. Even then another week was needed before the ballot could be issued. Another week is needed before action can begin. Throughout this entire period the FBU has repeatedly said that it is willing to call off the ballot and cease action if management calls fresh talks.

Wrack's defenders claim that the union is considering holding a ballot for strike action. In fact, the FBU has only said that it might hold a ballot for strike action at the "appropriate time". Why it would not be appropriate to call strike action when every firefighter in London faces dismissal and swingeing cuts are taking place across the country putting lives in danger, the union has not seen fit to explain.

There is no suggestion that the FBU will alter its consistent strategy of confining struggles to local and separate disputes, given the lack of any proposed nationally coordinated industrial action, despite the assault on firefighters in Essex and Manchester and common threats against all firefighters. It is even clearer that the FBU has no intention of making this dispute the foundation for a broader opposition campaign against the cuts.



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