

London fire fighters strike against mass dismissals

Paul Stuart

30 October 2010

London firefighters are to stage a second series of strikes on November 1 and 5, against the London Fire Brigade (LFB) imposing new cost-cutting rosters and the threat to sack those who refuse. The latest strike follows the eight-hour strike held by the workers on October 23.

Firefighters are involved in a highly political strike. The 5,600 strong workforce are confronting a state-sanctioned scabbing operation supported by the entire political establishment, including the Labour Party.

The greatest obstacle to defeating this is the role being played by their own Fire Brigades Union (FBU) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in isolating and sabotaging every struggle against the Conservative/Liberal Democratic government's unprecedented austerity measures.

In taking action, union members in London have stood out against roster changes already imposed in many parts of the country, thanks to deals struck between the Fire Brigade Service and the FBU leadership. They can only succeed to the extent their dispute becomes a catalyst for a broad industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class to bring down the coalition government.

Their struggle has to break free of the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy, through the formation of joint rank and file committees established between London Underground tube workers and others throughout the country facing similar cuts and threats of mass sackings.

Long before the first strike, the head of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, Brian Coleman, a Conservative member of the London Assembly, invoked section 188 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act. According to the FBU, on August 11 London Fire Brigade "formally began the legal process of terminating the employment contracts of 5,600 London fire fighters."

The termination date is set for November 26.

Coleman stated that "firefighters who don't sign the

new contract won't be re-employed." He added later, "I could put an advert in the *Evening Standard* and get 20,000 people applying. London will be totally safe."

During the earlier October 23 strike, Coleman claimed that 27 engines (FBU said only 11 were available) did as good a job as the 160 normally available. London Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson threatened, "There is a ninety-day consultation period. I think that is due to expire sometime pretty soon. Logical consequences will flow from that."

Labour leader Ed Miliband is making good on his promise not to support what he describes as "irresponsible" strikes. He opposed the firefighters strike, demanding it be brought to an end. This comes after he successfully appealed to the National Union of Journalists to stop a strike at the BBC that would have prevented the broadcasting of David Cameron's speech to the Tory Party conference.

The Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act was written into law in 1992 by the then-Conservative government and maintained by Labour. It is now being unfurled across the country to suppress resistance to the government's austerity programme, with 26,000 Birmingham city council workers and 8,500 Sheffield city council workers faced with the invocation of section 188.

In the face of such a ferocious assault, firefighters have taken a courageous stand. Contrary to media claims that a minority of militants are behind the strikes, 79 percent voted in favour of strike action. This group of well respected workers is being demonised in the press, as they confront a major strike-breaking operation led by Asset Co., a private firm that runs London's emergency vehicles through a Private Finance Initiative. Asset Co. is deploying a section of its non-union workforce to break the strike who, after a series of demonstrations against their activities, will be provided with a police escort. Asset Co. head John Shannon is said to have a close

relationship with Coleman.

The prime minister's official spokesman, Bob Neill, described the strikes as "reckless", adding that the government "will be doing everything we can to ameliorate the effects of the strike."

The *Daily Mail* have urged mass sackings and forcing firefighters to be trained as emergency ambulance crews to further slash jobs. It described London firefighters as a "bastion" of outdated privileges, citing the actions of Tony McGuirk, Chief Fire Officer for Merseyside, as an example for LFB to follow for his sacking of 700 he described as "bone idle" people.

The Spectator magazine published an article by Ed Holmes of the Policy Exchange's Economics Unit, which demanded an end to the right to strike: "One option would be to recognize—as Policy Exchange explored in our recent paper *Modernising Industrial Relations*—that fire fighters provide a life sustaining service which cannot be curtailed by strike action."

Holmes urged the government to "allow organisations to apply for judicial review to revoke statutory strike immunities".

The Policy Exchange is central to the Conservative's right wing agenda. Its website is littered with praise from the likes of Chancellor George Osborne and London Mayor Boris Johnson. Michael Gove, Conservative MP, described it as the most formidable "regular army" on the "think tank battlefield."

In contrast to the determination of the ruling class to smash up firefighter jobs and livelihoods, the paramount desire of FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack is to end the strikes. He was voted into office in 2005, in the aftermath of the treacherous role of former head of FBU Andy Gilchrist who capitulated to the Labour government and betrayed the 2002-2003 strikes that led to thousands of job losses and the expansion of privatisation.

Wrack traded on his reputation as a left and a former member of the Militant Tendency and Socialist Party, under conditions in which the FBU had voted to disaffiliate from the Labour Party in 2004. On taking leadership, however, Wrack pledged to loyally enforce the sell-out deal agreed by his predecessor. He told the *Guardian* in July, 2005, "There has been a sharp debate about the pay deal and the handling of the dispute. It is well known I was critical of both. However, as a general secretary the deal is settled and we will be abiding by it. We need to ensure it is implemented as fairly as possible... I hope we can work with politicians in the fire authorities

and at the government level..."

Wrack was re-elected last September, with the support of the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party.

At the last TUC congress, he supported what he described as "the building of a huge movement, led by the trade unions." Instead he has left London firefighters isolated and issued one grovelling apology after another for the strikes possibly occurring. He publicly opposed a call for joint strikes with Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union Underground workers and BBC staff confronting the same austerity measures.

Wrack has also sought to politically disarm strikers by insisting, "This is a trade dispute... It is only political in the sense that cuts in the public sector are being made by politicians."

In other words, the ruling elite can politicise the struggle as much as they want while Wrack works might and main to prevent workers from adopting a socialist programme to take forward their fight.

In an October 23 *Guardian* article, Wrack spoke for the entire trade union bureaucracy when he offered to end the strike immediately and without any resolution of the workers' grievances. "To get us back to work right now, we only need the dismissal letters withdrawn," he said.

The same day, following the strike, a protest against scab fire engine crews at Southwark fire station was joined by members of the RMT, which represented striking London Underground workers. Government ministers accused the RMT of engaging in illegal secondary strike action and demanded its leaders disassociate themselves from members showing solidarity. RMT General Secretary Bob Crow responded by pledging that no secondary action would be taken. "The RMT never interferes in the affairs of any other trade union," he said. "Like all good trade unionists we offer solidarity with colleagues in dispute. To suggest anything else is absurd, and frankly, clutching at straws."

To underline the RMT's and the FBU's hostility to united action, the next London Underground 24 hour strike will take place on November 2—one day after the November 1 firefighters' strike.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact