

# Two injured as London fire fighters resist strikebreaking operation

Our reporters

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London fire fighters staged a second strike November 1 against the London Fire Brigade (LFB), which is imposing new cost-cutting rosters and threatening to sack those who refuse.

The 5,600 members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) are resisting the state-sanctioned scabbing operation, organised by Asset Co., a private company that through a Private Finance Initiative runs all the emergency vehicles. The company has created a workforce to “assist” in strikebreaking.

Its efforts towards this end saw two fire fighters injured in protests on Monday. Striking fire fighters had gathered outside Croydon Fire Station in south London, denouncing strikebreakers as “scabs” and “traitors”. According to eyewitness accounts, one of the strikebreaker’s vehicles accelerated towards the picket line and struck Tamer Ozdemir, throwing him over the windscreen, 20 feet into the air.

A father of two children, Ozdemir was taken to hospital with injuries to his pelvis and legs. A spokesman from LFB stated that, “During demonstrations at Croydon Fire Station one person believed to be demonstrating has been injured after being hit by a car.

“London Ambulance was called at 3.20pm and a man has been taken to hospital with pelvic injuries. Due to a large number of protestors at the station and that incident, we have suspended the use of that station.”

Station manager Chris Young, who was reportedly in the car at the time, was arrested.

In a separate incident at Southwark fire station, where a large group of fire fighters gathered to protest the involvement of Asset Co., Ian Lehair was hit by a fire engine driven by scabs and taken to hospital with suspected broken ribs.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to fire fighters

picketing at Wembley central fire station. Again, large numbers of strikers had gathered after being told that Asset Co. were delivering three fire engines—one back into the station and two parked up just in case they were called out during the strike.

The pickets stood at the fire station entrance, stopping vehicles, and blocked the back entrance with cars. Police in numbers arrived, informing strikers that they could only talk to Asset Co. staff but could not stop them. The fire fighters called in workers from other stations to enforce the blockade. Asset Co. would not move, but after causing a major traffic problem they were eventually moved on.

Referring to simultaneous strikes by London Underground staff, one fire fighter said, “It’s a shame we are not all coming together. The strongest union in London is the RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport]. It can bring the capital to its knees if it wants to. We have an employer who won’t even negotiate. We don’t even get a formal input into changes in our terms and conditions.”

Another fire fighter stated, “Each Brigade is able to implement its own agenda—assessments of its own needs, they call it, an integrated risk management plan. It means that formerly national standards are now down to individual brigades to decide, rather than being covered by statutory legislation. What that’s led to is a whole series of attacks on terms and conditions and crewing levels, safety—all sorts of things—in brigades all round the country.

“Our primary concern about this dispute is that we think the real reason they want to change the shifts is nothing to do with being able to stick up more smoke alarms. We’re happy to stick up more smoke alarms, but what it’s really about is implementing flexible working to make large-scale cuts in the fire brigade and

also our terms and conditions. If it was really about smoke alarms, would they be going to the lengths of sacking us?

“They’ve got a serious agenda, which is about breaking the union, pushing through cuts and introducing flexible working. We are trying to defend fire cover and our terms and conditions.”

His colleague said, “This is a quite heavy turnout of the police. They outnumber us. I don’t know if they expect us to be violent. It’s a peaceful demonstration, nothing untoward. They want to impose twelve-hour shifts on us, which none of us are happy with. It’s not family friendly if you’re doing a twelve-hour day. With the journey to work and then the journey home, it’s a long day ahead of you.

“Because we don’t agree with that they are threatening to sack us. At the moment we do two nine-hour shifts and two 15-hour night shifts. With interrupted meal breaks, it’s a 48-hour week—they don’t count that. They’ve been chipping away at our conditions over the last years, constantly, lots of changes in the last 20 years. The authorities are trying to break the union, to destroy the union. There are not many major unions left. You’ve got like of the FBU and the RMT and other massive unions; they are just trying to make us weak at the knees.”

When asked about London Underground stations not covered during fire strikes and whether rail workers should refuse to work under these conditions, he added, “I’m surprised [RMT leader] Bob Crow hasn’t made an announcement on that. It would make us stronger, and the tube workers stronger, if we were to pull together. That’s the bottom line.”

Another fire fighter added, “This is not just about us. People are looking at the bigger picture. Let’s do it all together, coordinate it. I was out in Greece covering the events getting images for anybody who wanted them.”

Tim at North Kensington station said, “It’s incredible that the first round of public sector cuts equated to around £6 billion. Funny enough that’s what Vodafone is fighting to avoid in their taxes. And the government have said it’s sort of timed-out; it’s an old argument. Just drop it. Hang on a minute! So if I didn’t pay my taxes for long enough I could get a get-out-of-jail-free card? Complete double standards.

“The last Labour government was no better. We were still living under Thatcher, as far as I’m concerned. She

brought out this whole thing that it’s OK to be selfish. It’s alright to be ‘I’m alright Jack’, pull up the ladder, ‘No such thing as society,’ don’t ride on a bus—you’re a failure if you do. And successive governments of different political colours, including this bloody coalition, are still talking the same rubbish.”



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