

# Fire Brigades Union sabotages London firefighters struggle

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The strike by London firefighters has been cruelly betrayed by the Fire Brigades Union, under the leadership of General Secretary Matt Wrack. Only hours before a November 5, 48-hour strike was due to begin, Wrack called it off.

The full force of the state and the yellow press was mobilised against the firefighters. They faced a strike-breaking operation run by AssetCo and a media barrage portraying them as lazy, selfish, overpaid and endangering public safety. But it was the FBU that delivered a death-blow to the strike.

The Independent's headline "First blood to the Coalition", makes clear the political import of the FBU's betrayal.

The union has not only betrayed its own members, but has handed a victory to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government that has repercussions for the entire working class.

The FBU is using the excuse that it was forced to call off the strike because of fears for public safety on Britain's traditional Bonfire Night, given that the "service" run by AssetCo is so inadequate. AssetCo has 27 fire engines, instead of the usual 150 vehicles in operation, run by scabs with just two weeks of training.

Wrack said, "We have listened to the concerns about public safety, and we have watched the work of the private contractors who are supposed to protect Londoners with mounting concern." Joe MacVeigh, regional secretary of the FBU, claimed they had called off the action because they did not believe the private contractors could "keep London safe" and claimed that "This decision came from our members".

In fact no consultation was taken before the strike was called off. In the coming days the FBU will tell firefighters again and again that not to have called off the strike would have alienated the public. This is a rotten excuse for a rank betrayal. Firefighters are not responsible for having been forced to take action against measures that will not only cost them many jobs and force onerous working conditions on

them, but will permanently endanger the public—not just for one night.

The FBU secured nothing of substance in return for calling off the strike. Instead it will meet with the Resolution Advisory Panel on November 16 that will make recommendations to resolve the dispute. The FBU has made abundantly clear that it will agree a sell-out. It will "re-examine" an earlier "compromise" on proposed new shift patterns, meaning firefighters will work 11-hour day shifts and 13-hour night shifts, rather than 12-hour day and night shifts.

The London Fire Brigade has also suspended implementation of section 188 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, limiting consultation on the new deal to three months and threatening those who refuse with the sack. Wrack and other FBU leaders have stated repeatedly that this was all they wanted in return for calling off the action, with FBU executive member for London, Ian Leahair stating, "Withdraw the sacking letter and we'll find a way through on shift patterns."

Leaked documents prove that the alterations of shifts are part of a broader strategy to de-staff stations and implement station closures, including reducing fire engine crew from five to four. The government is expected to cut fire funding by 25 to 40 percent over the next four years, claiming that 25 percent reductions can't be generated simply through "efficiencies" and after millions have already been cut.

Just as important is the political impact of the FBU's cowardly act. In just two one-day strikes, picketing fire fighters faced increasing violence from the balaclava wearing AssetCo scabs that Wrack himself declared to be state-sanctioned violence.

Three firefighters were injured by scab vehicles entering fire stations at high speed. In Croydon a car driven by fire officers accelerated suddenly and one of the striking firefighters was thrown up and into the windscreen, then several feet in front of the car. AssetCo employees refused requests for first aid equipment before the injured man was

taken to hospital. An LFB manager was arrested. In another incident at Southwark fire station, Leahair had his legs and half his body pinned underneath a fire engine that had driven deliberately at him, which then refused to reverse until instructed to do so by the police. Many others escaped injury by the skin of their teeth.

Other measures were also in preparation.

The LFB had obtained an injunction before the proposed strike after claiming that picketing firefighters had tried to block fire stations during Monday's eight-hour walkout, with the FBU agreeing to a series of conditions, including a maximum of 10 pickets per fire station. Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson had telephoned Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson to tell him to make his officers ready to intervene to protect strike-breakers. Civil servants had also been asked for legal advice on whether fire fighters could be deprived of their existing pensions if they struck, on the basis that this would constitute a "break in service".

The FBU's capitulation will serve to embolden the government to implement further draconian attacks on the entire working class. The Independent baldly declared that "ministers are increasingly prepared to use tactics—including legal challenges—last seen in the 1980s to break resistance to their austerity measures."

In fact, business representatives and sections of the Tories are fully prepared to go far further than they did during the 1980s. After repeated calls by business groups for beefed-up anti-strike legislation, David Davis, MP, called for public sector workers to be stripped of their right to strike altogether. Calling large parts of the public-sector "state-funded monopolies", he said that all those who benefit from state-funded job training and "hands-on" experience should not be allowed to withdraw their labour. Boris Johnson has called for strikes to be illegal unless approved by fully 50 percent of all union members. Employers' organisations also want a license to use agency workers as scabs, the notice period for a strike to increase from 7 to 14 days after a ballot and the right to send out their own propaganda together with strike ballot papers.

That the government has so far not ceded ground to such demands is because they do not want to make more difficult the role being played by the trade union bureaucracy in acting as industrial policemen.

The trade unions today do not function as organisations of class struggle, but as mechanisms for its suppression. Their aim is, in the first instance, to prevent any action being taken by their members against the employers and the government. As a spokesman for the Public and Commercial Services Union told the media, "We are being represented by the Government as a one-trick pony who strike at the first

opportunity. But that is totally untrue. In all cases, strike action is our very last resort."

When it proves impossible to prevent a strike, the bureaucracy's every effort is directed to making sure that it does not get out of hand and force them into a real conflict with the ruling elite. To this end one-day strikes—deliberately isolated from those taken by other groups of workers—have become the norm. And as soon as they face any resistance—or, more particularly, when workers seek ways to take forward a genuine fight—a cave-in swiftly follows.

In the case of the FBU, Bonfire Night was used to run up the white flag on the very day that BBC journalists were due to strike and in the midst of an ongoing dispute on the London Underground. Last year the Communication Workers Union called off the postal strike with a rotten deal struck just prior to the Christmas holiday period.

In these disputes, the ostensible representatives of the pseudo-left are playing the leading role. Wrack is a former member of Peter Taaffe's Socialist Party. He still has close relations with it and is scheduled to speak at this weekend's "Rally for Socialism".

Such figures are hailed by the fake left as representatives of a "fighting, alternative leadership"—proof that the unions continue to be organisations through which workers can defend their interests providing militant pressure is placed on them by the rank-and-file. To this end they act as the chief apologists for the bureaucracy's every crime. In a statement issued at 9.51pm on 4 November, for example, the Socialist Workers Party rushed into print to politely state, after listing various supposed "concessions" by the LFB, that the FBU had made "a mistake" in calling off the strike.

Firefighters must reject and oppose the efforts of the FBU to sell them down the river. The dispute must be taken out of the hands of the union tops and organised directly by the rank and file. Like all other sections of workers, firefighters face a political struggle to bring down the Tory/Lib Dem government that requires new organisations of class struggle and the building of their own genuinely socialist party. The Socialist Equality Party is ready to lead such an initiative.



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