

UK Fire Brigades Union calls off Olympics strike action

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The UK Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has called off strike action set to coincide with the Olympics mountain biking events on August 11-12 in Hadleigh Farm, Essex.

General Secretary Matt Wrack cited “operationally sensitive information” received by the union, as well as worries about confusion caused to emergency services, as justification for the climb-down. Wrack, in an attempt to save face, said that “other short periods of strike action” would go ahead, but that he remained “ever hopeful that a breakthrough in negotiations will come sooner.”

The strike had been called as part of a programme of industrial action, including working to rule, announced in June against proposed cuts to Essex Fire Brigades. Firefighters voted two-to-one for the summer action, reflecting their concerns over job losses and the impact on public safety.

The FBU states that if the proposed cuts go ahead, Essex will have lost one in five frontline firefighters since 2008. This shocking statistic is an indictment of the role of the FBU itself, which has done everything in its power to minimise strike action.

The remaining strikes planned give an indication of their token nature, being scheduled for August 11, 9 pm-12 midnight; September 5, 9 am-1 pm; and October 18, 11 am-4 pm. So far, the union has called one 24-hour strike, following a one-hour protest and an 8-hour stoppage.

Even the action around the Olympics, the FBU insisted, was planned “so as not to disrupt” events.

The FBU’s abandonment of strike action during the Olympics follows the eleventh hour cancellation by the Public & Commercial Services Union (PCS) of a strike by Home Office staff on July 26, the eve of the Games. This would have caused severe disruption to Britain’s major airports on the busiest day of the year, and a substantial political embarrassment for the government.

The FBU noted in press comments that the one-day

strike on June 28 was the first in Essex since 2003. Since then, Essex fire authorities have sought to cut frontline services. They have pushed, at least since 1996, for the axing of permanent firefighters and for service to be maintained by part-time retained crews.

The FBU called separate action by permanent and retained firefighters this summer.

Over the last period, Essex firefighters, like those across the country, have continually been in dispute against cuts to services. Six months of action against cuts to frontline services were suspended in April 2010 for a resumption of talks. This was at the same time that 150 firefighters in Manchester were facing the sack. The suspension came shortly before a bitter strike in London against the imposition of new shift patterns, which had already been introduced in South Yorkshire.

Despite the sweeping assault on all firefighters, the FBU has sought to restrict actions to individual fire authorities, isolating firefighters even from their colleagues in the neighbouring authority.

At the same time, the FBU has supported the proposed merger of adjacent authorities as a cost-cutting proposal. In May this year, Andy Vingoe, Suffolk FBU chairman, endorsed the proposed merging of Cambridgeshire and Suffolk fire services administrative centres. He told the press, “There have been cuts over the years and we know budgets are under pressure, so many feel this could help retain the current level of service.” The only previous such merger, between Devon and Somerset fire authorities in 2007, saw 150 administrative jobs axed.

When the FBU strike was announced in June, there was predictable opposition from Tony Hedley, the Conservative Party chair of Essex Fire Authority. Hedley told the press, “This is 2012 not the 1970s and in all walks of life people are facing change and unprecedented financial uncertainty... we do not have a bottomless pit of cash and we have to modernise outdated working

practices and ensure that we are using our resources paid for by council tax payers in Essex in the most efficient and effective way.”

In practice, this has meant the wholesale privatisation of public services. Two years ago, computer giant IBM was awarded an eight-year contract to supply and manage the county’s public services. The council had already put £800 million of public services out to private contract, and was heavily promoted as the Tory flagship for such privatisation.

This has seen the enrichment of a narrow layer. Hedley’s assertion that people from “all walks of life” are facing financial hardship is belied by the fact that Essex Fire Chief David Johnson’s annual pay was raised by £28,000 to £176,000 last July.

There is another difference between 2012 and the 1970s. The biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression is now in its fourth year, and the scale of social cuts and reductions of living standards is greater than those faced by workers of the 1970s. But the most apparent difference is the complete acquiescence and collusion of the trade unions and their refusal to mount any significant struggle to defend the previous gains of the working class.

The real reason for the cuts to the fire service in Essex is not the need to “modernise outdated working practices” or ensure taxpayers’ cash is used “efficiently.” The cuts have been imposed by central government to fund the bailout of the financial institutions after the 2008 crash. Claims that councils are defending taxpayers, while reducing their protection from death by fire and still maintaining high council tax rates are nonsense.

The FBU’s one-day or three-hour strikes offer no means for forcing the reversal or even lessening of attacks on firefighters. They serve as a pressure valve to dissipate the anger of workers while protecting the privileged position of the union executives as industrial police for management.



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