

British firefighters to walk out over attack on pensions

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Firefighters in England and Wales are to stage a four-hour walkout on Wednesday, September 25. The strike, which was described as a “warning shot” by Fire Brigades Union (FBU) General Secretary Matt Wrack, is over the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s assault on fire service pensions.

Under government plans, firefighters will get their full pension at 60 years of age, up from 55 for those employed before 2006. Those forced out of work at 55 years of age because they are no longer deemed fit could lose up to half of their pension. Changes to pension conditions in Scotland are still under discussion.

Forcing firefighters to continue in a frontline role up to the age of 60 means putting their lives, and those of the public, at risk. A recent government review showed that more than half of existing firefighters aged 50 to 54 are unable to meet fire and rescue service standards for frontline jobs, while two-thirds of those aged 55 and over are below standard.

The FBU says government claims that firefighters will be redeployed are not practicable, given the shortage of existing jobs. This means hundreds could be sacked on significantly reduced pensions.

Wrack urged the government to compromise, saying, “It’s not too late to avoid a strike: the governments of England and Wales must see sense, put public safety first and come back to the negotiating table willing to compromise.”

The government has dismissed such entreaties. Fire Minister Brandon Lewis described the “issues of fitness and retirement age” as a “smokescreen.”

Lewis claimed that firefighters would still “get one of the most generous public service pensions available”—a grand total of £19,000 per annum, to which firefighters contribute 13 percent of their salary every month.

The 80 percent vote for strike action reflects widespread anger at the assault taking place on all aspects of fire provision, but which finds virtually no expression in the FBU’s proposed action.

A union press release points out that the coalition had announced 25 percent cuts in the fire service over four years in its first Comprehensive Spending Review 2010. In the first year of these cuts, between April 2011 and March 2012, some 1,457 frontline firefighter jobs were lost and 2,172 jobs from the fire service as a whole. Of these, 926 were full-time firefighter jobs and almost 400 were retained firefighters. More than 130 control jobs were lost—some 7 percent of all control jobs in 2011.

But the Spending Review set out that the cuts would be “backloaded,” meaning the worst will be introduced from this year. The FBU estimates this could be a reduction of up to 10,000 firefighters’ jobs over the four years—one in five of all existing firefighters.

As a result of the cuts already implemented, response time has increased. Five years ago, one in three incidents was responded to in five minutes or less. In the year up to 2012, this had fallen to one in six.

The scale of the planned cuts can be seen in London, where Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson last week pushed through his plans to cut the number of fire stations by 10, with 14 engines and 552 jobs axed.

Under the misnamed London Safety Plan 5, there are plans to bill building owners for false alarms and for brigades to charge call-out fees when they attend a fire in a neighbouring area because the local crew is unable to attend.

Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green members of the London Assembly made show of opposition to the plans, but nothing that would actually block them. A supposed “consultation” procedure ended with a small

decrease in the number of stations and engines cut, but with the number of job losses increased from 500.

When the majority of the Assembly voted against the plan, under extraordinary powers granted to the London mayor they were instructed to let it through. On receipt of legal advice that there was no basis to challenge the mayor and that continued obstruction of the plan would leave Assembly members open to legal sanctions, the Labourites, Liberal Democrats and Greens gave up the game.

On September 11, at Mayor's Question Time, Johnson refused to rescind his proposals. Heckled by firefighters, Johnson dismissed criticisms as "b*****ks" and told one critic to "get stuffed."

The following day, Johnson's opponents balloted "tactically to create a hung vote of 8 for and 8 against, forcing Chair James Cleverly to use his casting vote to implement the Plan," the *MayorWatch* web site reported.

Speaking after the vote, Labour's London Assembly Fire spokesperson, Fiona Twycross, said, "We are all deeply disappointed that Boris' cuts have now been forced through... However, the legal advice we received was categorical and clearly stated we had no legal basis to challenge the mayor in this way. If we had gone down this route, then we would have spent a large amount of taxpayers' money fighting a futile battle."

A similar situation is replicated across the country. Greater Manchester council has been told it must cut a further £10 million from its budget for next year, with additional cuts the year after. This makes the Manchester fire authority the third-worst hit area by government austerity measures.

In Merseyside, the number of fire engines in use has been cut by one-third in the last three years and the county's chief fire officer has warned there is worse to come. This month, Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service took a further six units out of use—a reduction from 42 appliances in 2010 to just 28. The service has to make further cuts of £9 million in 2015.

In South Yorkshire, the region's fire authority accepted plans to cut the number of firefighters and make a number of crews part-time as part of £12 million savings. Retiring firefighters will not be replaced and four out of five fire stations will have just one full-time crew at night instead of two.

The government has said that it has "robust"

contingency plans in place for Wednesday's strike, which will take place from noon to 4 p.m. It has said that armed forces personnel will not be brought in unless there is a major incident.

Many fire authorities are to use non-FBU members, backroom staff and special "reservists" they have been recruiting since July in the event of action.

According to *West End Extra*, fire cover in London's busy West End has already been halved for the last six weeks "after one of the station's two engines was removed by fire bosses to train a strike-busting team."

It reported that the fire engine had been removed from Soho along with 26 other vehicles from across the capital. They "have been kept in a Territorial Army base in southwest London, where the Swedish security firm Securitas's workers have been given a crash-course in fire cover."

Surrey County Council is also bringing in the private firm Specialist Group International during the four-hour walkout.



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