

UK firefighters demonstrate against pension cuts

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Around 4,000 firefighters demonstrated in London on Wednesday against plans by the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition to cut pensions. The protest followed a strike on September 25, in which 32,000 firefighters walked out for four hours, and in advance of a second, five-hour strike set for October 19.

Under government plans, firefighters are being forced to work to 60 years of age instead of the current 55 years in order to get their full pension. Anyone made redundant at 55 because they are no longer considered fit could lose up to half of their pension.

Forcing firefighters to continue in a frontline role puts 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.

Hundreds of firefighters could be sacked on significantly reduced pensions.

Some 80 percent of firefighters voted for strike action, reflecting widespread anger at the assault taking place on all aspects of fire provision. This finds virtually no expression in the proposed action by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

The government has dismissed all the FBU's pleas. Fire Minister Brandon Lewis described the "issues of fitness and retirement age" as a "smokescreen."

Huge attacks on pensions have gone ahead unopposed. Following the November 30, 2011 action against public sector pension cuts that involved 2.5 million workers in some 20 unions, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) called off further strike action for negotiations. Together with other unions, it worked to divide public sector workers along sectional lines, with separate "scheme-specific" talks on pension schemes

largely involving secondary issues.

By early 2012 just three public sector unions agreed to hold a consultative ballot on a national strike, which again fizzled out. The FBU was not involved and has now left firefighters isolated.

In the meantime, 1,457 frontline firefighter jobs and 2,172 jobs in the fire service as a whole have been lost. As many as 10,000 jobs could be lost—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.

In London, 10 fire stations are earmarked for closure, with 14 engines and 552 jobs axed. Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green members of the London Assembly feigned opposition to the plans, but when threatened with legal proceedings caved in. 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.

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.

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. In South Yorkshire, the region's fire authority has accepted plans to cut the number of firefighters and reduce coverage at night-time. In recent weeks, fire cover in London's busy West End has been halved in order to train a strike-busting team for next Saturday.

Oppositional sentiment found its reflection in the vote for the FBU's disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 2004 and the election of Matt Wrack, a member of the

of the so-called “awkward squad” of trade union leaders and former supporter of the Socialist Party, as FBU general secretary the following year. Although calls for re-affiliation to the Labour Party have been repeatedly defeated, two Labour MPs were allowed to address Wednesday’s demonstration.

Alex, a firefighter from south London, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “We signed a contract that the government is now breaking. We will have to work longer and pay more. We’ve also had a pay freeze.

“Two fire stations near my one look like they are going to be closed. And then there is increasing privatisation. Training has already gone that way and other areas are going the same way. The union seems powerless to resist.”

Dave, from a fire station in Norfolk, said that he was due to retire in a year or two but was supporting the demonstration because the future of the fire service was at stake.

“We have seen our pay frozen for the last few years. But it is not affecting just me. My family has seen pay cuts too. I am a trustee of two charities and the money coming in has gone right down. It means that the less well-off are being affected. At the same time, the government is supporting the rich. Things really need to change.”

John from the Birmingham area said, “I don’t know why the FBU had those two Labour MPs speaking. The Labour Party was responsible for starting the privatisation of the fire service. It was a joke to listen to that Labour MP who used to be a miner talking about how the miners fought and telling us to do the same. Look what happened to them. He should be ashamed of himself.”

Ian Lavery MP replaced Arthur Scargill as National Union of Miners president in 2002. Membership of the union is less than 2,000, compared with around 200,000 prior to the 1984-85 strike.

“I hear that the teachers are having a demonstration at this same place tomorrow. Why couldn’t we protest together? If all of us affected got together there would hundreds of thousands of us and the government couldn’t stop us. The union leaders always harp on about us being united, but they won’t unite us and teachers and council workers and all the rest. They seem to be keeping us deliberately apart.

“I agree with your idea about rank-and-file

committees apart from the unions. You can see this demonstration has brought together loads of firemen and they are really angry. I think they really want to change things, but I’m not sure how we can do it.”



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