

London mayor threatens to dock pay of striking firefighters

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The Conservative Party Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, has threatened to issue a directive to the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) to dock striking firefighters a full day's pay even if their walkout only lasts a few hours.

Johnson's call followed the latest wave of strikes by Fire Brigades Union (FBU) members against attacks on pension conditions, including a proposal to raise the retirement age from 55 to 60.

Last month, Fire Minister Brandon Lewis claimed that "the deal being offered gives firefighters one of the most generous pensions in the whole public sector and yet the FBU keeps disrupting a taxpayer-funded service with more unnecessary industrial action. The proposals put forward protect the earned rights of a higher proportion of members than any other public sector scheme. Nearly three-quarters will see no change in their pension age in 2015."

According to a BBC report, the average annual pension payment for retired firefighters is £12,000—a pathetic amount, especially given the cost of living in London.

Since 2004, fire authorities across England have been subjected to more than £200 million worth of cuts involving the reduction of personnel, equipment and fire stations and the gutting of firefighters' working conditions and pensions.

Johnson is proposing further cuts to London fire services and firefighter pensions that he says will amount to £45 million in savings over the next two years. Under the provisions of the Greater London Authority Act 1999, the Mayor has complete control over the Authority.

Johnson has previously used this power to ensure that cuts to services and the closure of stations go ahead. In February 2013, the Mayor issued a directive to close 10

fire stations across London, declaring that the "consultation" with the LFEPA "will continue as planned. I will be issuing a mayoral directive to ensure it does."

In a July 23 meeting of the London Assembly, Johnson demanded London Fire Commissioner Ron Dobson explore "withholding payment from firefighters for part or the whole period of duty on which they are on strike." Johnson wants the fire authority to offset the costs of scabs hired by the private strikebreaking company Capital Guard and to punish strikers by docking their pay.

His latest proposed use of the power marks an escalation of direct attacks on workers. Johnson is resorting to dictatorial measures, overturning decisions by the local authorities and issuing directives to enact draconian cuts on workers.

Johnson represents the interests of parasitic layer of the financial elite that he has described as "hedge fund kings." Since taking office in 2008, he has mounted one attack after another on public sector workers and London's workers more generally.

Last November, he announced that all London Underground ticket offices would be closed by 2015. At the same time, he pushed through an amendment to set "affordable" rents at 80 percent of market value, continuing his policy of social cleansing in London by ensuring they would be beyond the means of the lowest paid.

Each action by the firefighters has been met with an increasingly determined strikebreaking action and the deployment of 27 privately owned fire appliances. In 2009 AssetCo was awarded a five-year contract for providing frontline firefighters. The *Evening Standard*, at the time, characterised the deal as "£9 million for 700 reserve strike-busting firefighters."

A year later, these were used with increasing violence against firefighters striking against the imposition of new rosters and cost-cutting measures. The FBU sabotaged that dispute, calling it off at the last minute, having secured absolutely nothing. The *Independent* portrayed the significance of the betrayal, describing it in a headline as “First Blood to the Coalition.”

The unions have continued to play the key role in disarming workers against the legal authority already available to Johnson and his ilk.

Firefighters have struck 14 times since last autumn and joined the July 10 public sector strike. The FBU also held two two-hour stoppages on eight consecutive days between July 14–21. This has been followed by ongoing action short of a strike, with firefighters not working voluntary overtime, non-contractual overtime or any additional voluntary hours.

Firefighters in England and Wales are set to begin eight days of action on August 9. They will strike each day for two hours between 12 noon and 2 pm and then for one hour between 10:59 pm to 11:59 pm.

But these are entirely tokenist actions, designed solely to let off steam while giving Johnson a free pass.

Last year, FBU Regional Secretary Paul Embery cultivated illusions in the LFEPA’s legal position as a defence against cuts, saying the FBU “do not believe [LFEPA] are under any legal obligation to comply with the Mayor’s authoritarian demand.”

Embery and the FBU were well aware of the provisions of the 1999 Act, but sought to tie opposition to the cuts up in legal challenges that would achieve nothing. As with similar approaches taken over health and transport, this amounted simply to an appeal to the coalition to soften the blow, with the FBU politely asking that the government “holds true to its election pledge that no frontline services will be cut and they halt the closure of any London Fire Station and any job cuts within the London Fire Brigade being imposed” by Johnson.

The stations duly closed.

Despite the continuous attacks on firefighters across England, the FBU has restricted strike actions to individual fire authorities, isolating firefighters from other firefighters in neighbouring authorities. As Embery’s comments indicate, they are most concerned to protect the privileged position of the union executives as industrial police for management.



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