

Greater Manchester, England: Labour-controlled authority threatens all firefighters' jobs

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The Labour-run Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority (GMFRA) has threatened all 1,250 firefighters it employs with the sack unless they sign up to a new and inferior contract.

The GMFRA has served notice on the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) under section 188 of the Trades Union and Labour Relations Act 1992, enacted by a Conservative government, after failing to reach agreement on roster changes.

The Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service provides cover for a population of 2.6 million people.

The duty changes are bound up with a package of cuts, including redundancies, of £14.4 million over the next four years. In June the authority announced 250 job losses—one in five frontline firefighters.

If, after a 12-week “consultation” period there is still no agreement, the firefighters will be issued with redundancy notices and will have to reapply for their former jobs on the basis of signing the new contract. The contract will change the duty rota to two 12-hour shifts. Previously firefighters worked a 10-hour day shift and 13 hours at night. Shift starts will move from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. in the daytime, and from 19:00 p.m. to 22:30 p.m. for the night shift, impacting family life.

The GMFRA claims the changes will increase productivity and flexibility, and reduce the use of fire appliances at night when the service is less busy. According to Manchester Brigade branch secretary Gary Keary, however, “Incidents at night tend to be more serious.”

To induce them to accept the new rosters, the GMFRA is telling firefighters that it could mean 32 jobs will be saved. This will be the third change to shift

systems in Manchester since 2006.

Yet the FBU has mounted no unified response to mobilise its members and has allowed the government and local authorities to impose cuts on an area by area basis.

In Scotland there are plans to cut control rooms, while staff shortages mean that six engines are removed from service each day. The county of Essex faces 30 job losses of frontline firefighters. Lincolnshire abandoned its recent attempt to outsource its fire control room functions due to the actions of its workforce. Suffolk council is about to axe one fire engine to balance the books, even though that engine had 300 call-outs up to August this year.

Instead of mobilising their members, the FBU is appealing to the very politicians—both Labour and Tory—who are committed to cutting public expenditure, which as a percentage of GDP is expected to fall from 45.5 percent in 2010 to 35 percent in 2020.

The fire service, like the National Health Service, is already at a critical juncture due to funding cuts of 30 percent since 2010, during which time 10,000 firefighters have lost their jobs.

As well as putting out fires, the fire brigade attends to floods, terrorist incidents, industrial explosions and train and road accidents. Services for all these emergencies will be compromised.

According to the government’s own figures released by the Department of Communities and Local Government last December, response times to fires are now at their slowest for 20 years. The London Fire Brigade, for example, is failing to meet response time targets in more than half of all emergencies.

Lancaster University published findings this year that

showed that the 50 percent of call-outs that failed to meet the six minute response time target were in areas which had seen station closures—10 in London in 2014.

As statistician Dr. Benjamin Taylor explained, “Even one minute extra can make all the difference to a fire victim’s chances of survival.”

Austerity cuts have already led to avoidable fire deaths. Among a number of high profile fire deaths recently was that of 85-year-old Choi Yip who, after waiting desperately for 13 minutes for the fire brigade to arrive to deal with a fire, jumped from his third floor flat in Camden.

The FBU released a video this May called “Every Second Counts” that targets government cuts as the cause for a rise in fire deaths, linked to slower response times. The social impact of government cuts has also led to an increase in the incidence of fires due to poor housing conditions.

The last time there was any coordinated action organised by the trade unions in the UK was the public sector workers day of strike action in 2011 against attacks on local government pensions, which received overwhelming support. Since then the individual unions called days of action in their own unions to diffuse the anger and opposition of their members. Finally each union made their own agreement with the government, which in every case meant extending the retirement age, increasing pension contributions and ending the way pensions were calculated, from a final to an average salary basis.

Firefighters now have to work to 60 years of age, instead of 55, before they can claim their pension. This is in a very demanding job, both physically and psychologically. Firemen too sick to work after 55 will suffer a reduced pension, and younger members of the force who develop post-traumatic stress disorder are now sacked on grounds of incapability and receive nothing.

Manchester Brigade Secretary Gary Keary has written to Labour councillor David Acton, who is the chairman of the GMFRA, calling for his resignation. However, in the letter Keary also made clear that there would be no fight organised, reassuring Acton, “You are well aware the FBU is committed to working with the Brigade to assist the organization in making changes enforced upon it by central government budget cuts ... this commitment remains.”

The Fire Service is soon to be taken over by the Police and Crime Commissioners. Addressing the annual Trades Union Congress last week, FBU executive member Tam MacFarlane warned that this takeover was a “cost cutting exercise” and that the “Fire Service will be run down to fund the police.”

The TUC then passed a toothless motion to “protect the Fire and Rescue Service,” but with no commitment to action.

It is thanks to the collaboration of the TUC and the Labour Party that firefighters can be threatened with mass sackings or being legally dismissed by their employers. The Blair Labour government that came to power in 1997 upheld all the anti-union laws passed by their Tory predecessors.

The FBU, under the leadership Matt Wrack, who is politically close to the pseudo-left Socialist Party as well as the Socialist Workers Party, is steering the anger of the FBU membership back towards support for the Labour Party. In response, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn expressed his delight that the FBU had decided to resume affiliation to the party.

The fact remains, however, that the threat to Manchester firefighters comes from a Labour-run authority. To date, as with his refusal to call for support for the junior doctors’ strike, Corbyn has said nothing on the attack.

Irrespective of who leads the Labour Party, the threats levelled against Manchester’s firefighters make clear that it is deeply hostile to the working class and that the trade unions are working to isolate and demobilise workers. The only way forward is by breaking the stranglehold of these organisations, through the building of new rank-and-file organisations, informed by a revolutionary socialist perspective.



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