

UK firefighters voting for first national strike since 2003

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Firefighters and fire service control staff across the UK are voting on whether to strike over pay. The ballot of 32,500 members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) is being held over eight weeks, closing January 30. The workers are being offered a de facto pay cut offer of five percent.

Firefighters maintaining an essential public service are poorly paid. A trainee earns as little as £24,191 while a fully competent firefighter, trained to enter burning buildings, earns only £32,244. Control staff start on a mere £20,603 a year, only rising to £25,755 after 5 years.

The last national strike was in 2003, when firefighters demanded a 39 percent pay increase, before the FBU settled for 16 percent. A series of one-day strikes were held in England between 2013 and 2015 in defence of pensions.

Spending on fire fighting has been eroded for years. In 2022 the FBU reported that, in the previous five years, funding in England was reduced by 13.8 percent in real terms. Some services, including Oxfordshire, Warwickshire and Sussex, have lost as much as 40 percent. Of 43 brigades in England, 41 have lost at least 10 percent of their funding.

In the decade to 2020, England lost 21 percent of its firefighters, 9,444 workers. In Scotland, over 1,000 jobs were lost between 2013 and 2017 following the merger of eight regional services into the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, while the Scottish National Party government intends a freeze on fire service spending for the next five years.

Meanwhile, the demands on declining numbers of firefighters have escalated with environmental breakdown intensifying floods and summer fire seasons.

Around 500 firefighters in London drove ambulances

during the worst peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic. An unknown number of firefighters died from the disease.

All of this has been overseen by the FBU.

At the same time, chief fire officers have benefitted from ballooning salaries. The average pay for a chief fire officer is reportedly £148,000. Each of the UK's 48 fire and rescue services has a chief fire officer. The current London fire commissioner takes home £206,000 while his equivalent in Scotland collects between £185,000-195,000 annually.

The FBU's protracted ballot follows equally slow-moving consultations on the sub-inflation pay offer. In May 2022, seven months ago, firefighters were offered a mere two percent pay increase by the employers when the current rate of inflation (CPI) was at 9.1 percent. Retail price inflation (RPI) was at 11.7 percent. According to the FBU, this followed real-terms pay cuts of around 12 percent between 2009 and 2021.

It took until July 18 for the FBU Executive Council (EC) to unanimously reject the offer. The following day the EC announced, "the necessary work to prepare for a ballot for national strike action will continue." That timescale would be dictated by "the anti-trade union legislation" and "tactical and strategic considerations to ensure the strike has maximum effect."

It wasn't until September 2 the FBU announced it was intending to start a strike ballot in "five weeks' time," halfway through October. FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack appealed, "The ball is now in the fire service employers' court. It is not too late for them to make a much better pay offer for consideration by our members." Early October, the employers marginally improved their offer to 5 percent, still well below inflation, which had meanwhile increased to 11.1 percent (CPI) and 14.2 percent (RPI).

Rather than move to an immediate strike ballot, the

EC used the new offer as a pretext for further delay and called a consultative ballot. This ran from October 31 to November 14, and resulted in a 79 percent rejection of the offer, based on returns from 78 percent of these eligible to vote.

Wrack noted nervously the “remarkable strength of feeling amongst firefighters and control staff on this derisory pay offer.” Firefighters in Merseyside are already in dispute. Following an 80.6 percent vote in favour of action short of a strike on December 1, workers are refusing pre-arranged overtime for as long as six months over staffing and contract issues.

A formal, postal only, national strike ballot was finally called, but with the closure date pushed to January 30, meaning firefighters will not be part of the February 1 “unified” strike day currently being mulled by some union officials.

Throughout the escalating national dispute, the FBU has been at pains, using the most slavish adherence to the anti-trade union laws, to keep the firefighters apart from the many sections of workers involved in strike action since last July.

This took a particularly sharp form December 6, when 2,000 firefighters and control staff, travelling from all over the country, rallied in Westminster to lobby their MPs. Wrack and MPs including former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn addressed them in Westminster Hall.

Wrack said, “You’ve turned out in your hundreds. I think this demonstrates the anger that’s out there. The government has found £45 billion in tax cuts to give away to millionaires, but they will tell you that there’s no money for pay and no money for the Fire and Rescue Service. Corporations enjoy record profits. Some people are becoming richer and richer, and yet the government tells us there’s no money.”

Wrack, a former member of the Socialist Party, is promoted by pseudo-left groups as a fighter for the working class.

But despite his rhetoric nothing was done to mobilise firefighters alongside the hundreds of thousands of workers already in struggle against the employers and government. Three days later, December 9, 15,000 postal workers from all over the UK demonstrated in Westminster during the first of their recent series of strike days. Presented with the opportunity to bring together two powerful groups of workers—both

currently in dispute with their employers backed by the reviled Conservative government—the FBU and the Communication Workers Union did the opposite.

The efforts of the trade union apparatus to maintain sectoral divisions in the working class and neutralise the most intense class struggles for decades are giving the government breathing space to organise strike breaking and new legal assaults on workers’ rights. These include proposed bans on certain public sector workers taking strike action at all, along with minimum service level rules and more restrictive ballot demands prior to strikes taking place.

In early December, press reports noted that 2,000 military personnel were being trained as ambulance drivers and firefighters. Tory chairman Nadhim Zahawi warned his government were looking at a “specialist response force” to provide “surge capacity” in the face of attempts by workers to maintain their standard of living. The Scottish government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service were also reported to be considering whether “it would be appropriate to request military assistance as part of its business continuity arrangements.”

Firefighters and control staff can place no confidence in the FBU apparatus. They and their families and supporters are posed with creating their own rank-and-file organisations of struggle to unify their fight with those of millions of other workers. We urge workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss the way forward.



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