

Firefighters in UK vote massively to strike, FBU leadership delays action

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Over 30,000 firefighters and fire service control staff in the UK have delivered huge majorities for a strike following an eight-week postal ballot.

Workers rejected a five percent pay offer—a de facto pay cut with inflation at over 13 percent—by 88 percent in England, Scotland and Wales; 94 percent in Northern Ireland; and 80 percent in North West Fire Control, which handles emergency calls.

The result shows the intense anger built up among firefighters over years of declining pay and conditions. The FBU notes, “Since 2010, firefighters have suffered a 12% drop in real terms earnings – around £4,000 a year on average.

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/Greens government intends a freeze on fire service spending for the next five years.

The ballot result places firefighters alongside many other sections of workers who, over the last weeks and months, have taken determined strike action in defence of their living standards and the vital services they provide.

Inevitably, the widely anticipated result was seized on by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) leadership not to prepare a serious struggle, but to do everything to reassure the employers that a strike could still be avoided.

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack informed the union’s Twitter channel, “The executive council (EC) decided, over a week ago we would not call strike action immediately.” Instead, Wrack and the EC had written to the employers and the government calling for a meeting of the National Joint Council negotiating committee, which will now take place February 8. This meeting would be an opportunity for the employers to “revise their offer.”

Wrack’s already published January 25 letter merely speculated that among fire service employers, “there is a growing understanding of the need to improve the current

offer on pay.” He placed no figures on this, or related it to attacks on fire service provision, or broader attacks on the working class. Nor did Wrack mention the Conservative government’s new anti-strike legislation currently making its way through Parliament. Instead Wrack merely appealed to the employers to “present an improved national pay offer which is different to any currently discussed and worthy of consideration by FBU members.”

Wrack’s vague demand for something “different” is a frantic appeal to the employers to throw him a bone such as a productivity deal, or a cost cutting package which could be presented as a pay increase and a pretext to shut down the dispute.

The terrible situation facing firefighters is the responsibility of the union bureaucracy who have done nothing to stop the mass cull of jobs, pay cuts and undermining of their members conditions.

The current dispute stretches back nearly a year and it took months for the FBU to even call a ballot, such was their desperation to avoid a confrontation with the employers and government. In May 2022, firefighters were offered a mere two percent pay increase by the employers with the rate of inflation (CPI) then at 9.1 percent. It took until July 18 for the FBU Executive Council to reject the offer, but the union didn’t announce until September 2 that it intended to start a strike ballot in “five weeks’ time,” halfway through October. In 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).

Wrack, a former member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, is following the tactics deployed by the rail, teaching, health and education union leaders in seeking to suppress the demands of their own memberships.

But the Conservative government has no intention of allowing any meaningful concessions. The FBU ballot outcome coincided with the passing on its third reading Monday of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill in the House of Commons. The Bill authorises the imposition of

Minimum Service Levels in key sectors of the public and private sector workforce. Those being targeted first are the “blue light” ambulance, fire/rescue, and then rail services—to be followed by all health and education workers. The legislation now goes to the House of Lords.

The government is also intensifying preparations to use the military and private contractors as a strike breaking force. According to the *Independent*, January 26, the government was convinced the ballot would return a majority to strike. A Royal Air Force (RAF) base outside London is reportedly being prepared to host soldiers and fire engines, with plans laid for another 27 appliances to be seized from the London Fire Brigade and handed over to a contractor to operate. No numbers of soldiers to be deployed were available, but 1,200 troops were used in scabbing operations against striking ambulance and Border Force staff over the winter holiday period.

Troops may also be sent to Northern Ireland. According to Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service chief Andy Hearn, if agreement cannot be reached with the FBU on whether firefighters would be able to respond to high-risk calls, a request for Military Aid to Civil Authorities could follow.

While the government is planning a mass scabbing operation, and the legal suppression of strikes, recent incidents and reports underscore the daily peril firefighters face.

Fire fighter Barry Martin died from injuries received during a serious fire in the former Jenners department store in Edinburgh, January 24. Martin, 38, was one of over 100 firefighters who attended the “serious and complex fire”. Four other firefighters were treated in hospital for burns and smoke inhalation. The cause of the fire in an historic building which was in the process of being converted into a hotel is under investigation.

Nature magazine recently published a series of scientific reports on the physical and mental health of firefighters. The UK Firefighter Contamination Survey by the FBU and the University of Lancashire found in “Cancer incidence amongst UK firefighters” that serving UK firefighters have far higher cancer rates than the general population, due to repeated exposure of toxic contaminants. Four percent of all surveyed firefighters had a current cancer diagnosis. Firefighters aged 35 to 39 had a cancer rate 323 percent higher than the general population. In all, 28 different cancers were extracted from the firefighters' reports, of which skin cancer, reported by 38 percent, was the most common.

The survey also found that firefighters who could detect soot in their nose and throat four hours after a fire, or who stayed for over four hours in their Personal Protective Equipment, were twice as likely to be diagnosed with

cancer.

Twelve firefighters, among the 1,300 who attended the June 2017 Grenfell Tower inferno in London, have developed incurable cancers—possibly the result of exposure to deadly contaminants released by the blaze. Some are relatively young men in their forties.

The same survey was used for “Mental health of UK firefighters” which found that firefighters have a rate of depression three times that of the general population, are twice as likely to suffer anxiety and a 20 percent higher rate of all mental illness. Sleeping problems were reported by 61 percent. While previous reports have focused on “psychological factors such as direct exposure to trauma and stress” this report noted “little is known about the relationship between firefighters' exposure to fire effluent and mental health.” The report noted “Given that firefighters spend prolonged amounts of time attending fire incidents, their capacity for exposure is far greater when compared to the general population and other occupational groups.”

As with the health workers, the firefighters' struggle against the employers and the government for a decent level of pay and the safest possible conditions is one all sections of the working class will identify with and support.

But workers are also posed with overcoming the role played by the trade union apparatus in working to suppress the class struggle and preventing a unified mass movement emerging. New rank-and-file organisations, to unite firefighters, health workers and all sections of the working class in a struggle to remove the government, block and anti-trade union legislation and extract the necessary resources from the financial oligarchy are urgently required.



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