

Fire Brigades Union ballots on two years of pay cuts

Vote No to sellout agreement!

Steve James
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Less than two weeks after 30,000 fire fighters and control staff voted overwhelmingly for industrial action, the leadership of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has postponed announcing strike dates and will ballot members on a new offer that is a substantial pay cut.

The ballot is due to run for two weeks from February 20 to March 6 with the FBU bureaucracy stating it “unanimously recommends that members accept [the] revised pay offer.” Firefighters should reject the poverty pay agreement of 7 percent (backdated to July 1, 2022) and then an even lower 5 percent from July 1, 2023.

Over December and January, firefighters voted by a huge majority (88 percent in England, Scotland and Wales, 94 percent in Northern Ireland) to take action against the miserable 5 percent, sub-inflation pay deal offered by employers. Turnout was 73 percent.

Commenting on the result on January 30, FBU General Secretary and former member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party Matt Wrack wrote in the *Guardian*, “In voting for strike action, firefighters have sent an unambiguous message to the government: we need a fair pay settlement, and we will fight to get one if we have to. With such an overwhelming mandate for action, I can confidently say that our members are solid and united.”

The FBU's sanctioning of the below inflation offer only shows that behind warm words hides their intention to end the firefighters struggle for decent pay as quickly as possible.

Wrack was careful not to put a figure on what was a “fair pay settlement”. Previously, he appealed to the fire service employers for an offer “worthy of consideration by FBU members.” The meaning behind

Wrack's vague message was clear enough. He would struggle to prevent industrial action unless a marginally improvement on the pay offer, then at 5 percent, was made.

After the vote, Wrack and the FBU executive refused to set strike dates, instead waiting until scheduled talks with the employers. After hours of negotiations, February 8, the FBU and the employers came up with another 2 percent on the 2022 pay offer. But this was part of a proposal for two years of pay cuts instead of one.

Speaking to Sky News Thursday, Wrack had to correct anchor Kay Burley when she asked, “You’ve postponed the next strike for an increased pay offer. During lengthy talks with the employers. What can you tell me?”

Wrack replied, “We were at a meeting with the employers late into the night last night and we have a revised pay offer. We haven’t called any strikes. So we haven’t postponed anything.”

The fact that the FBU thinks it can sell the rotten deal to its members is because the employers’ initial offer was so staggeringly low! Wrack enthused that the new “offer is testament to the power of collective action through the Fire Brigades Union. Last year we were offered an insulting 2 percent. The employers have now revised their position.”

He did so as he admitted, “While the offer is improved from last year, it still amounts to a real terms pay cut.”

In July 2022, the RPI (retail price index rate of inflation which includes mortgage costs) stood at 12.3 percent. Over the year it averaged at 11.6 percent. The new offer gives firefighters 7 percent backdated to July

last year, a pay cut of close to 5 percent over the year.

The proposal also ties workers to a 5 percent increase from July this year. But RPI is currently at 13.4 percent and is expected to peak at 14.1 percent before falling towards an average of 10.7 percent over 2023, more than double the percentage increase.

Nor are there any details of how the miserly offer is to be funded. Fire services have suffered year-on-year cuts. Between 2010 and 2020, 9,444 fire service jobs were lost in England and Wales while over 1,000 were lost in Scotland. According to the FBU, between 2016 and 2021 fire service funding was reduced by 13.8 percent overall, while some services have lost as much as 40 percent of their finances. In total only £873 million was provided by central government, part of £2.5 billion spent on fire services overall, with the rest coming from local government taxes.

In comparison, the UK has already spent £2.3 billion on the NATO/Russia war in 2022—which has cost hundreds of thousands of lives and devastated much of Ukraine—and anticipates spending more in 2023.

Wrack promised “honest and sober” internal discussions over the latest offer. This will be geared to how best to sell the package to firefighters. Speaking to the BBC, Wrack acknowledged the problems he would encounter: “I don’t think people will be jumping for joy. People have had 12 years of attacks on their pay. They won’t be over the moon.”

In the period ahead, the FBU leadership will work to present the new offer as a qualified victory and the best that can be achieved under the circumstances.

On February 1, during a day of coordinated strike action by several unions, not including the FBU, Wrack spoke in opposition to the Tory government's new anti-strike laws. The Strikes Bill authorises the imposition of Minimum Service Levels during strikes by key sectors of the public and private sector workforce. Those being targeted first are the “blue light” emergency services including firefighting.

Wrack proclaimed on the FBU web site, “Striking workers have the support of the public because it is only by standing together that we can win decent pay for everyone.” Everything that has transpired shows only that the FBU apparatus is working to ensure that the firefighters struggle is kept apart from every other section of workers and closed down as soon as possible, and that no fight is waged against dictatorial

laws aimed at criminalizing its own members.

New organisations of struggle are needed to draw together all sections of workers in a common struggle for a genuine living wage outstripping inflation, high living standards and well-funded public services. Contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today to discuss the way forward.



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