

The Fire-fighters

The fire-fighters are fighting for a 40% pay increase, from £21,00 to 30,000 per year. The ballot was 9 to 1 in favour of strike action, with an 84 % turnout. The Northern Ireland ballot was 97 % in favour of strike action. “This is the biggest national vote, in any union, for strike action since the trade union balloting laws were put in place” [FBU]. The strike includes all workers of the fire service, such as control room staff and most of the ‘retained firefighters’. The only other firefighters strike which was in 1977 and went on for nine weeks, was undermined by the union leaders and TUC and ultimately defeated. Only the firefighters were on strike, not the support staff.

Restructuring

The government headed Bain inquiry of the fire services, due out in December, is all about ‘modernisation’ and above all ‘flexibility’, including: overtime rules, joint control rooms and merging with the ambulance service (i.e. cutbacks), new shift systems, rank structures and work conditions, as well as the ‘role and philosophy of the fire service’. Several things are at stake here:

- Many firefighters have second jobs - forced overtime could jeopardise this.
- In the US the fire service is also used as a paramedic service, initially responding to all calls. The refusal of UK fire-fighters to carry defibrillators is an attempt to prevent the intensification of work, i.e. doing two jobs at once. This would also intensify the ambulance staff’s work by running a bare minimum staff.
- This could pave the way for worsening of conditions and casualisation or outsourcing of parts of the service (e.g. the control rooms to the ambulance control rooms).
- Firefighters could be on call after the end of a normal shift, i.e. working too many hours in one day.
- New part-time staff coming in with lower wages and worse conditions. This could include women workers.
- Under this review any pay rise is linked to a review of the work contracts.

Breaking down the walls between us

When a part of this whole society stops playing its role it is easy to see how interconnected society is. Some sectors have the ability to affect the smooth running of the whole economy. The firefighters (along with e.g. transport workers) are one of these sectors. The real, practical implications of the safety aspects of the firefighters’ strike mean a knock-on effect for many workplaces, without them having to break the law of no ‘secondary action’. People can turn up at their workplace but refuse to enter unsafe buildings, carry out tasks etc. The current health and safety laws put the onus on the worker to look out for potential hazards, and for employers to do health and safety assessments. If every group of workers who faced such risks walked out - as they are entitled to under the law - then key sections of the economy would grind to a halt.

- The TUC are advising unions to ask employers to carry out health and safety risk assessments for the strike days. This is a legal way of supporting the fire fighters.
- The tube workers will shut 19 tube stations.
- The Fire Service College at Moreton in the Marsh have refused to provide training for military personnel for the dispute.
- The rail unions are stating that the working conditions will be unsafe to work in.
- Schools are worried about arson attacks at night. The government recommended they employ night security guards, but won’t give them any extra money to do so.
- “Many colleges have tower blocks. Evacuation procedures for wheelchair users above the second floor are to put them in a refuge area and wait for a fire appliance with a long-reach arm. The Green Goddesses will not be able to get them out. That means those buildings are unsafe during a fire brigade’s strike.” said Paul Mackney, general secretary, NATFE.

There is potential for spreading and extending the discontent into action. If real links were made between these groups and action was co-ordinated, the whole would be much greater than the sum of the parts.

The other way round there are examples of firefighters showing class solidarity. For example: They refused to put out burning barricades on the miners picket lines during the ‘84-5 strike; they have refused to break open squats for the police; they have refused to fit riot barriers to their fire engines before certain incidents of planned civil disobedience.

The public sector and the government

Anti-government feeling is growing: there is massive discontent and strikes breaking out in all areas of the public sector and there is opposition to the war with Iraq. In just two months we have seen industrial action by teachers, rail workers, tube workers, law court workers, airport staff and refuse collectors. When 32 tube drivers went on unofficial strike in Glasgow on 6 November, they were sacked immediately because “Strathclyde Passenger Transport will not tolerate such militant behaviour”, showing a certain fear of the rise of militancy. If the firefighters win this, then a wave of strong public sector strikes could be expected. The firefighters are a sign that workers can challenge the state, and/or their employer. They are in a strong position as an essential service and their struggle can easily spread. The government need to break this strike as a symbol of their own strength and determination.

The public services are a battleground at the moment and the firefighters still have traditional long-term work contracts with relatively good conditions. The Glasgow tube drivers have been re-instated with worse work conditions than they had before the strike.

The government needs to keep public sector wages down, partly to keep a lid on costs, partly because it needs to make its current PFI deals attractive to business. It is now becoming harder and harder for business to make money, so it looks for new areas of potential business and it finds the ‘public’ sector. The government’s PFI deals will look less attractive if the bidding firm has to take on a higher wage bill and a militant workforce. What the firefighters are showing is that, whoever the boss may be, whether the state or a private firm, workers need to fight to safeguard their interests against the logic of profit. The safety record on the railways for both workers and passengers shows how the logic of profit can affect our lives. This also affects ‘public sector’ services run according to this crazy logic, such as the health service.

The role (play) of the unions

The Awkward Squad:

Gilchrist, the union leader, has initiated the action, and they are being supported by other ‘radical’ union leaders such as Bob Crow from the RMT (transport) and Mark Serwotka from PCS (public service) who are demanding health and safety risk assessments. Derek Simpson, newly elected leader of the Amicus union, says, “We will encourage any groups of workers whose safety is legitimately compromised by lack of fire cover to leave work.” Amicus has members in car plants, factories, chemical works, and across industry. They are terrified of fires because the Green Goddesses don’t have breathing apparatus. Dave Prentis, general secretary of Unison (local government, etc), issued a circular calling on union members “not to undermine the FBU in any way, and as a general principle... not take on work which would in normal circumstances be done by FBU members”. Mick Rix of Aslef has said the tube, and underground networks in Liverpool and Newcastle, will be unsafe without professional fire cover.

The recuperation:

However, the unions stand in-between the workers anger and the bosses and act as a buffer. The current militancy in the base of the unions forces the leaders to be radical, to keep the support of, and so control over, the rank and file. The unofficial action in 20 London fire stations on the day of the proposed strike showed Gilchrist that if he made too many deals, the struggle could get out of his hands. Now the strike has started it will take on a momentum of its own through the experience of the firefighters and their supporters.

The FBU leadership have to make compromising deals and postpone action when negotiating with the government in order to maintain their own role as mediator, and therefore their own union jobs and the whole existence of the unions. If workers just took action themselves the legitimacy and existence of the unions would be threatened. They play the game with the bosses, as much as try to ‘lead’ the workers. This has led to the recuperation of workers’ dissatisfaction into union-boss deals over and over again in recent years, or ‘selling out’. The basic contradiction of exploitation is thus smoothed out and ‘managed’ by the unions, but they also act as a focus point for struggle. This contradictory position can lead to the recuperation of anger into smoother exploitation or to wildcat strikes and workers’ self-organisation.

The army

The army and their totally inadequate 'Green Goddesses' will be used to provide (very) basic fire cover, meaning the government can "morally" hold out longer before making concessions to the firefighters demands. The government is using one set of state employed workers to undermine the struggle of another set. They can issue order to the army, without fear of refusal. The government is playing their trump card, and hoping to increase the popularity of the army. After the army doing fire duty in 1977 an army officer claimed: "We have got closer to the trust of the public. If it came to tanker drivers striking or anything else like that, we would feel far more confident about our arrangements." The army will be fighting the external and internal war. By forcing the government to use the army to fire-fight at home they are also helping in sabotaging the war effort. There is currently a Queens Order to call up or retain the reserve army, essentially putting the TA on standby. They are seriously worried that they have a lack of soldiers for the pending war. The Financial Times said: "Another concern is that a prolonged strike could overlap into the military build-up for a war with a Iraq and lead to firefighters securing a higher pay deal as a result. Senior officers are worried this would highlight the pay gap with the armed forces and could lead to soldiers resigning, as occurred during the last firefighters' strike 25 years ago."

The government may order the release of the fire engines for use by the army. In France the firefighters occupied their own fire station and when the police came to evict them, the firefighters turned their hoses on them. We use and maintain machinery every day at work, but are then told it is not 'ours'. We can take over this machinery and use it for ourselves. For our struggle, and to meet our needs. What are a private leasing company going to do with a load of fire engines anyway, other than have them used by firefighters!

You can still be done for inciting the Army to refuse orders – so the fire-fighters leaflet to the army in 1977 had to be very carefully worded: „Would it surprise you to learn that 340 firemen are seriously injured on duty every year, compared with 384 soldiers in Northern Ireland? Have you heard that a fireman’s real wage, taking in inflation, has fallen 20 percent in the last four years? Do you realise that the majority of firemen would support higher wages for soldiers, and for that matter for every underpaid worker? „After reading this do you think it would be in the public interest (a) for the government to continue using you to do firemen’s work? (b) for it to settle with the firemen?“

The fire last time

“Four FBU members at the Bethnal Green Fire Station (including a union representative) told us in 1982: “Bringing the troops in was just a publicity exercise, an enormous con-trick on the public just to reassure the patient that he wasn’t dying. The Green Goddesses were useless. They had no equipment and no training. The government, the army and the public have no conception of what firefighting involves. There was no fire cover, it was purely cosmetic. It prolonged the strike; **it would have been cheaper to give us the money, but Callaghan was determined to break the strike.** We weren’t allowed to speak to the troops, couldn’t get near them. I wouldn’t vote Labour again. Callaghan destroyed all his support. As a member of the public I’m glad they used the army. As a fireman I’m not - my hands were tied; it put the whole public in danger. They weren’t being used as fire cover, they were there to break our strike. Some of them were just kids; they could have died. They’re still just cannon fodder. That’s a measure of the government’s determination: they would let people die. I’m less dedicated now, I won’t risk my life any more. If people are involved, or if it’s someone’s home, OK. But I’m not going to die saving property.”

From “Troops in Strikes” by Steve Peak

Fire our spirits

For any strike or struggle to succeed it needs to overcome its own boundaries of one workplace, employer or issue. It is then that the division imposed on us can be broken down, that new ways of running things for ourselves can be found, and we can begin to work together for the good of all. At the moment our connection is mediated through getting our wages, to then go and buy back what we made or did. It is us who are making the things that we need and providing the services in our everyday work. When we realise this basic connection in common struggle, then fundamental changes to the 'work for money, money for things' (or wage slavery) society can be made!

The firefighters meet a real social need. Workers in this situation are often squeezed because they are reluctant to cause the effects a strike would have. The government uses this against them, up to the point where they are pushed to make hard choices. A total strike is one of the most powerful weapons we have. But there are other methods of struggle: on one of the days the strike was called off, the firefighters in some 20 stations in London took unofficial '999 calls only' action. Bus

drivers have driven busses, but refused to take fares. These examples show people attempting to use their activity as a way of meeting each other's needs, rather than working according to the logic of profit.

Many people die of 'capitalism' all the time – of poverty, industrial deaths, war etc. The class struggle is the only way to bring down capitalism and thereby prevent these deaths. Many accidents are as a result of the drive for profit, meaning that work is done too fast, safety procedures are by-passed, corners are cut and equipment is dangerous.

All society should and can be organised to meet human needs, and not according to the logic of profit. Making the things we want and providing the services we want can be agreed together. Currently, it is mediated through the bosses and governments (and the markets they attempt to manipulate) deciding what 'jobs' are worth what amount of 'money'.

We want to live in a human community where the response to accidents and disasters are not rationalised, reduced and squeezed so the consequences are not so devastating. For a world organised for the good of all, without money and wage work.