

Victory to London firefighters!

LONDON FIREFIGHTERS were on strike for eight hours on 23 October, against changes in shift patterns which will pave the way for cuts. The bosses prepared a scab workforce to try to break a legal strike, and stole 27 engines from stations. London is normally served by 169 engines.

Paula Mitchell

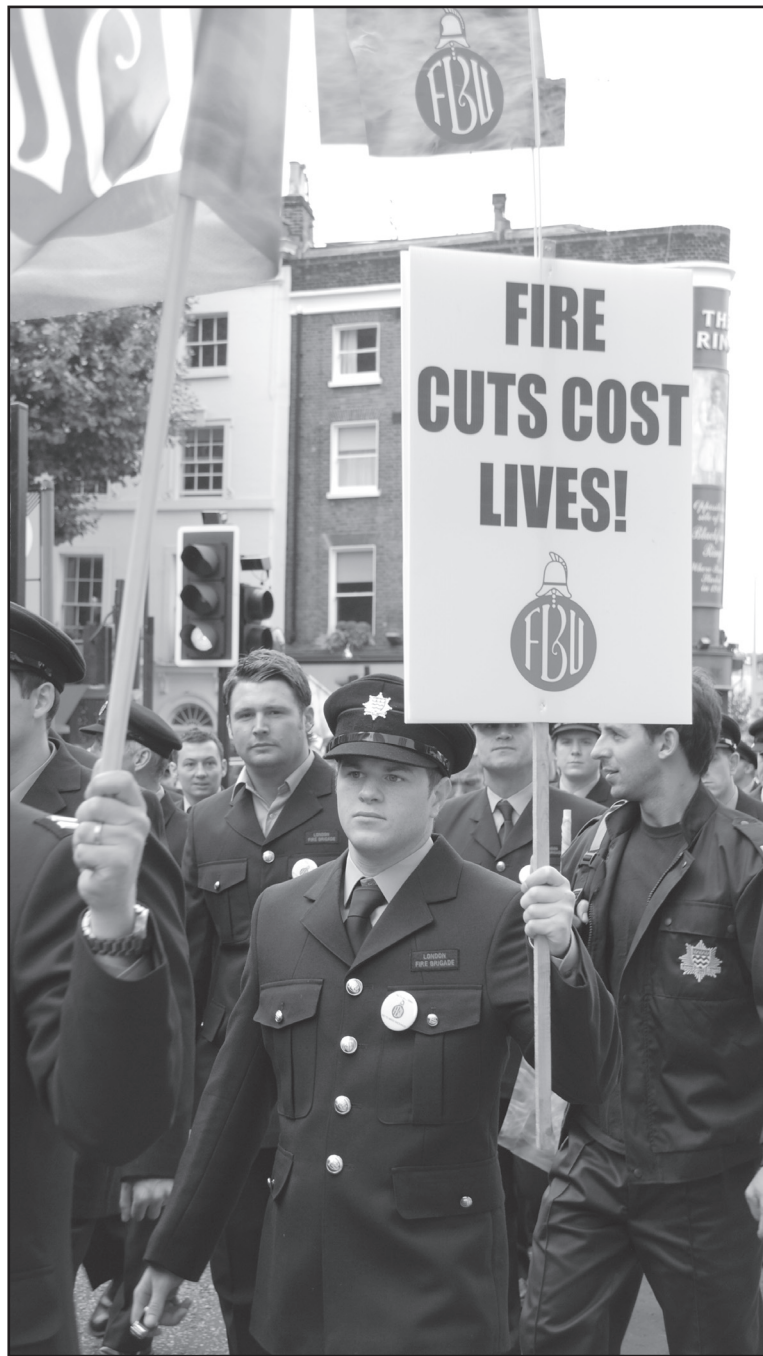
A private firm, AssetCo Fire and Rescue, is being paid £12 million to provide civilians to operate a fire service during the strike. This private company has a seven-year contract to provide an "emergency fire crew capability service" in London in the event of terrorist attacks, flooding or a pandemic. This in itself is an outrageous start of privatisation of essential services.

The provision of such vital services should not be a source of profit but should be publicly funded and democratically controlled. But now, as the FBU warned would be the case when the contract was started, this is being used as a scab force.

This approach by bosses requires a serious response from the trade unions across London. In an indication of the kind of solidarity that is necessary, the RMT is backing its members who stop trains and close stations during a fire service strike, as they would not be safe.

A support and solidarity group has been established through the public services committee of the South East Region TUC. We need to ensure this goes beyond supportive speeches and fund-raising - important though these are - and takes steps to develop real, properly backed, solidarity action from other trade unions.

• The next strikes are scheduled for 1 November and 5-7 November. Workers on London Underground will also be striking on 2 November, against job cuts and attacks on tube maintenance.



On the large FBU demo before the strike.

photo Suzanne Beishon

Solidarity at Homerton

IN A true show of unity, firefighters from every watch came in to Homerton station on the morning of the first day of the London-wide strike.

Workers were waving FBU flags and they received plenty of support from locals who passed the station, and nearly every car that passed gave a supportive honk. The strikers applauded as FBU rep Karl Haider read out messages of solidarity from other local unions.

Homerton was one of the 27 stations around London which was expected to be a base for AssetCo scabs, which only added to the

strength of feeling on the picket line. As it happened no scab crews turned up, with stories being passed on to the workers that some engines had been spotted waiting in a supermarket car park, while others had been seen driving round the streets waiting to be called on! Later reports suggested at least three engines had to be taken off the road due to the incompetence of those driving them.

The workers were in a determined mood, ready to fight against the attacks on their working conditions as well as attacks on their union itself.

Michael Wrack

Tackling bullying bosses

"LONDON FIRE Brigade Commissioner Mr Dobson and his principal managers have acted like playground bullies since the start of this dispute. They've refused to negotiate seriously, they've threatened firefighters in attempts to get them to work outside their contracts, they've threatened to sack the whole workforce in order to get their way and now they've unilaterally removed fire engines from operational fire stations, making Londoners less safe from fires, and all the other emergencies routinely attended by firefighters.

"I'm glad that the membership of the Fire Brigades Union are prepared to stand up to the bullies. Right now the FBU and striking firefighters are the only thing standing in the way of cuts to London's fire cover."

Steve White, FBU Poplar

"ON 15 October 2010 the Commissioner for London Fire Brigade sent FBU members letters threatening to make unlawful deductions from salaries of up to 60% of pay, for working in accordance with their contracts of employment. The threats of unlawful pay deductions now compel members to work compulsory overtime for an indefinite period without agreement.

It is threats and bullying like this and the threat of mass sackings that have forced firefighters to vote in favour of strike action, but this can all be resolved tomorrow if the LFB withdraws the threat to sack firefighters and instead commits to negotiating a collective agreement which the FBU are committed to achieving."

Ian Leahair, FBU executive council member for London

BA bosses try to control union

THE LATEST offer by British Airways management to cabin crew aimed at resolving this long running dispute was released on 20 October. The deal is broadly similar to the one rejected in August, although there is a slightly improved pay offer for existing crew.

Neil Cafferky

On the burning question of the staff travel discount, which was removed by management as punishment for taking industrial action, there is also a slight improvement. Certain aspects of the discount were re-instated on 21 October. The remainder of the discount will not be restored until 1 April 2013. There are also guarantees about preserving existing terms and conditions.

However these slight concessions are dwarfed by some truly astounding conditions management have foisted on the union. First of all the union was forced to recommend the offer to members otherwise the deal would have been withdrawn. Not content with this interference into internal union democracy, BA are insisting that any future communications by the union with cabin crew be 'fair and balanced'. Presumably the company will be the arbiter of this.

In a grotesque inversion of reality the company insists it "will continue to ensure that its communications are balanced and objective."

There appears to be no mention of reinstating union members who

On the basis of this offer, rejection is in the best interests of cabin crew and workers at BA.

lost their jobs during the dispute. The deal also stipulates that if a victimised employee goes beyond the ACAS process and takes legal action, Unite will offer no financial or legal support.

Although there are certain guarantees of a pay rise these are conditional on the absence of industrial action over the lifetime of the agreement. In effect a no strike agreement.

Finally, new entrants will be on inferior terms and conditions. At a stroke, cabin crew at BA have gone from having the best terms and conditions in the industry to a section of crew having some of the worst.

If the deal is rejected Unite will immediately issue a ballot for further strike action. On the basis of this offer, rejection is in the best interests of cabin crew and workers at BA as a whole. The interference into internal union affairs by management is the thin end of the wedge.

If a new ballot is launched, Unite should invite the senior reps of the other sections of the BA workforce, including members of other unions, to a meeting to discuss practical steps to support further cabin crew action and defend trade union rights at the company.

Disaster for local government

THE CON-DEM government's public sector spending review is disastrous for local government, with 28% spending cuts in local authority budgets, (real terms), over four years - more than double the 3% annual cuts previously demanded by the New Labour government.

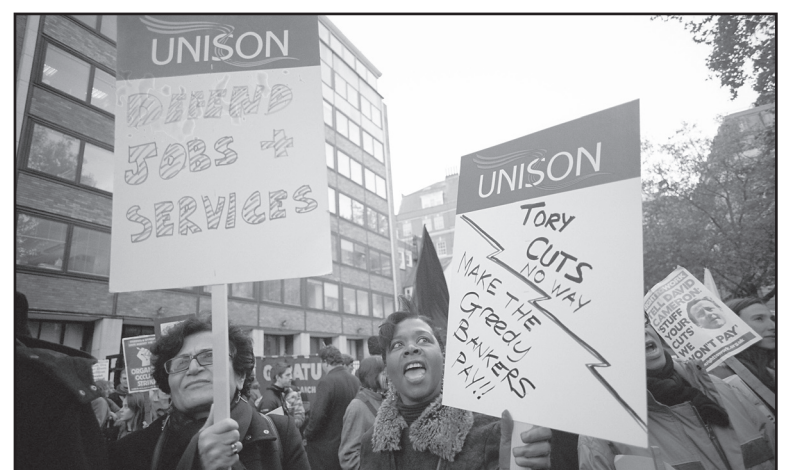
By a Unison local government worker

The government claims that the schools' budget is protected, this is not the case. Increases of 0.1% are claimed. But this only makes sense if the Pupil Premium, a Lib Dem policy supposedly aimed at directing resources to schools in areas of social deprivation, is included. The Lib Dems originally claimed that this premium would be in addition to normal budgeted amounts. Schools will be worse off, and even schools in deprived areas will be worse off.

A major share of these cuts will be 'front loaded', and take effect early in the four year cycle, in 2011/12. This is a blatant attempt to diminish the effect of cuts towards the next general election, (assuming the coalition holds together for that long!)

Politicians of all main parties like to justify public expenditure cuts by saying that they will not affect frontline services. This is a false distinction, so-called backroom staff are essential, just as in the private sector.

But now even the Tory-dominated Local Government Association is admitting that these cuts will result in cuts to frontline services, and



On one of the demos on 20 October.

photo Paul Mattsson

specifically refer in their statement on the cuts to services from "keeping children safe to ensuring that the streets are clean".

For local government workers these cuts will lead to redundancies, pay cuts and attacks on overtime rates, sick pay and other conditions of service. Unfortunately none of the main local government unions have a national strategy to oppose the cuts, relying on a branch by branch approach, as opposed to a strategy of national industrial action.

This means that militant, left-led branches will take action, and win or lose depending on circumstances. On the other hand weak, right-led branches will do nothing, and thousands of members will lose their jobs, or have their pay cut.

This is why initiatives like the National Shop Stewards Network are important, mapping out a viable

fighting strategy for ordinary workers and encouraging union activists to keep up the pressure in their unions for fighting policies.

Local government will be a major battleground but ordinary workers will also suffer from cuts in public services, as schools, libraries and swimming pools close, and vital caring services are wound down. The opportunity will be presented to link public opposition to cuts with industrial action from local government workers. And in the municipal elections in May next year, anti-cuts candidates will oppose both Con-Dem and Labour candidates, who shed crocodile tears about cuts but vote for them anyway.

Despite weak national leadership from the unions, as the anti-poll tax campaign demonstrates, workers can act together and can defeat reactionary policies.