

Solidarity with London firefighters

London firefighters are engaged in a serious battle to defend jobs and working conditions. Fire bosses want to change their shift patterns to make it easier to introduce a casualised, part privatised service. They have threatened to sack every firefighter to force them to sign new contracts. After a big ballot majority for strike action, the first strike on 23 October was solid. On 1 November, as we report below, there was a vicious approach by management, using scabs employed by AssetCo to try to break the strike.

DESPITE THE tirade of abuse against firefighters in the press in recent days, public support for pickets on the morning of their second strike day was high. At Plaistow in east London, at times it seemed like half the passing cars, vans and buses were supporting the strikers.

Paula Mitchell,
London Socialist Party

One firefighter explained: "The gutter press have been terrible - door-stepping firefighters and their families, going through their rubbish; lying that firefighters are greedy and after more money.

"There's two things people need to know that are being ignored in the press. One is that the fire brigade has threatened to sack us. The other thing is that [London fire chief] Coleman said on the radio recently that he wanted to do to the firefighters what Thatcher did to the miners. He is out to break our union".

But the attempts at running a scab service were a farce. Firefighters mounted determined picket lines on fire stations but in many cases no scab crews turned up. Pickets learned of scab engines spotted waiting in car parks, and being taken off the road due to the incompetence of drivers.

Firefighters are giving the employees of AssetCo, many of them retired firefighters, a letter appealing to them not to scab: "We urge you to respect our picket line, and not to cross it. By breaking our strike, you will be helping to put us out of a job, and our families will suffer as a result, as will Londoners.



FBU general secretary Matt Wrack stopping a scab fire engine.

"We appreciate that when you signed up for the Reliance/AssetCo project it was not made clear to you that you would be used to cross picket lines. It is not too late to change your mind, and we urge you to do so."

The fire authority bosses are trying to bring the Fire Brigades Union to its knees. They are backed up by the government and Tory London mayor Boris Johnson, and national and London media. As they do with the RMT union, right-wing rags like

the Mail and London Standard, have mounted an onslaught against the FBU, with outrageous accusations of intimidation and strong-arm tactics.

A serious response is required from the trade unions across London and wider. At the least, strikes by different groups of London workers should be coordinated.

In an indication of the kind of solidarity that is necessary, many tube trains did not run during the 23 October FBU strike, as they would not

be safe. A solidarity meeting called by the public services committee of SERTUC (South east region TUC) aims to set up a solidarity committee.

This is something Socialist Party members through the Shop Stewards Network have argued for - for at least the 'willing' trade unions, such as FBU, PCS, RMT and CWU, to be able to discuss and prepare solidarity action.

Health and safety advice is necessary from the FBU to other unions.

This could lay the ground for stoppages across the tube network, and prepare for workers refusing to work in public buildings, schools etc, with the backing of their unions, as they would not be safe in a fire service strike.

If the firefighters are sacked at the end of this month, that should be met with a London-wide solidarity strike. This could be prepared for with a London demonstration of all trade unionists in support of the firefighters.

photos Suzanne Beishon

Strike solid across London fire stations

Woodford

The FBU picket line at the Snakes Lane station was solid and well supported, with around 30 firefighters on it. Despite rumours that strike-breaking firm AssetCo would try to run engines out of the station, there was not a scab in sight. The mood was firm - with redundancy notices hanging over the head of every firefighter, it couldn't help but be. This is an urgent dispute for firefighters and all other trade unionists.

Linda Taaffe from the National Shop Stewards Network and Waltham Forest Anti-Cuts Union addressed a gate meeting of the strikers and offered help from the Anti-Cuts Union to get FBU members into other workplaces to talk about the health and safety issues on strike days.

This would lay the ground work for closing down public buildings, such as schools and other council services, because of the danger of running them on days when there is only minimal, under-trained scab fire coverage.

These ideas were welcomed and an FBU member will address the Waltham Forest Anti-Cuts Union meeting to get the ball rolling on arranging this.

Greg Maughan

• See also details of the National Shop Stewards Conference below

Poplar

"The strike went really well, it was very solid. At Poplar we had 100% on strike. We had pickets at every fire station. There was only a handful of strike-breakers across the whole of London, most of them senior managers.

Pickets gathered to keep AssetCo out of a number of central hubs where they were trying to gain access. The fire authority had hired private security firms with Alsations to help them. We managed to keep them out of four: Hillingdon, Shoreditch, East Ham and Wembley. We're ready for the strike on 5-7 November. We don't want it to happen but management are leaving us no choice.

Thanks for all the support from local trade unionists and other activists who've come down to the picket line. Please carry on, it makes a real difference."

Jon Stabler, FBU chair, Poplar fire station

Around 50 firefighters work at Poplar fire station over four shifts, and well over 30 turned out to picket in the morning. A few came from other local stations

to support, as Poplar had been one of the target stations for AssetCo to use in the last strike.

The mood on the picket line was determined. Firefighters are angry and frustrated at the threat of mass sacking, but both strike days have given them confidence in their power and how much difference it makes having trained professionals rather than the casualised, semi-trained force fire chief Brian Coleman is trying to impose on London.

Naomi Byron

East Ham

Thirty firefighters and one firefighter's baby daughter were picketing East Ham fire station.

Virtually every car driving past tooted in support. One firefighter summed up the attitude of management when he explained how Chelsea fire station has been put on the market for £35 million because of its location on the Kings Road, making the fire service's bottom line look good but leaving the people of Chelsea without a single fire engine.

Lewisham

A solid picket line formed outside Lewisham fire station all day with striking

FBU members cheered by the constant tooting of passing cars - showing that many other workers had not been taken in by the press attacks.

Pickets explained that: "This dispute has been brewing a long time. Management are always 'take' but no 'give', taking advantage of our goodwill every time. They want to run the fire-service as if it's a business.

"When the redundancy notices were followed up by threats of pay deductions, the mood hardened. We've had people join the union this time who weren't on strike in the last dispute."

Martin Powell Davies

Fulham and Hammersmith

West London Socialist Party members visited striking firefighters at the Fulham and Hammersmith stations on 1 November.

The large peaceful pickets at both stations met with a lot of support from the passing public.

Tom Gilson, the steward at Hammersmith station said that the mood was solid and determined and that action would continue until management removed the threat of sackings.

Protest at picket line injuries



Dear Chief Officer of the LFB

Like many other trade unionists, I am appalled to read this morning about the hospitalisation of two members of the Fire Brigades Union, including Executive Council member Ian Leahair.

These attacks on trade unionists engaged in lawful trade union activity will only help convince public opinion that the Fire Authority is acting in a bullying and unreasonable manner in this dispute, not the FBU.

I urge you to remove the notices threatening firefighters with dismissal so that a negotiated settlement to the dispute can be reached.

Yours sincerely
Martin Powell-Davies,
National Union of Teachers,
National Executive Member for Inner London.

National Shop Stewards Network
Anti-cuts conference

Saturday 22 January 2011, 12-4pm
South Camden Community School, Charrington
Street, London NW1 1RG.
See www.shopstewards.net

Socialism 2010

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary, will address a mass rally of socialists and trade unionists from across the country on Saturday 6 November in the Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London at 6:30pm as part of Socialism 2010, a weekend of political discussion and debate organised by the Socialist Party. For more information, visit www.socialism2010.net. See also page 2