

VICTORY TO LONDON FIREFIGHTERS!

Support and solidarity necessary

London firefighters have answered bullying bosses with a massive vote for strike action. The anger and determination is clear: they voted by 3,482 to 943 to take strike action unless the Fire Brigade Commissioner withdraws his letters of dismissal. The fire bosses want to impose new contracts by sacking London's 5,557 uniformed and 41 non-operational firefighters. Contracts which not only threaten firefighters' jobs, conditions of work and family lives, but will open the door to the destruction of the fire service as we know it.

Leader of the London Fire Authority, Brian Coleman, is a Tory councillor and London Assembly member for Barnet. Well known for claiming expenses for exorbitant taxi fares and dinners, Coleman is part of a council attempting to force through EasyJet-style services in Barnet. This means the council providing only the barest minimum of services and people paying for anything extra. In reality, this is where he's taking our fire service!

The majority for strike was 79% and the turnout was 79%. Fire Brigades Union general secretary Matt Wrack said: "This is a huge vote for strike action. Firefighters hate going on strike - but they hate being bullied even more. This vote demonstrates that London firefighters will fight these mass sackings every step of the way."

The strike follows a campaign of mass meetings. Thursday 16 September saw one of the most formidable demonstrations in the capital city for some time. 2,500



uniformed firefighters marched with FBU flags and placards, whistles and vuvuzelas, and even a bagpiper, to protest outside the London Fire Authority. London FBU members were joined by FBU delegations from Scotland, Yorkshire, Devon and Dorset, and other brigades around the country. As one London firefighter explained: "London is the biggest brigade in the country. If they get away with this here, they'll go for the rest of the country."

Tough battle ahead - serious solidarity needed

But firefighters know this could be a tough battle. In an indication of how brutal the bosses are prepared to be, they have prepared a scab workforce to try to break a legal strike, and have stolen 27 engines from stations. This demonstrates that they are prepared to run fast and loose with people's lives in order to pursue their

bullying agenda. London is normally served by 169 engines.

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 publically funded and democratically controlled. But now, as the FBU warned would be the case when the contract was started, the 700 people who signed up to this company, some of them retired or part-time firefighters from outside of London, are now being used as a scab force. FBU spokesman Paul Embery doubts whether

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all 700 civilians would report for duty as many had signed up believing they would help in the event of a flu pandemic and not to help break a strike.

This serious approach by bosses requires a serious response from the trade unions

across London. In an indication of the kind of solidarity that is necessary, Steve Hedley from London RMT has stated that his union will do its best to ensure that no trains run during a fire service strike, as they would not be safe. It is to be welcomed that a support and solidarity group has been

established through the public services committee of SERTUC (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.

Fight All Cuts!

The strike is three days after the announcement of the government's savage spending cuts. Trade unionists and community campaigners from all over the capital will march behind the firefighters on the London anti-cuts demo to say "No to Cuts!"

The strike action and demo on 23 October are important in themselves. But they also show the central role that working class people, organised in trade unions, play in the fight against cuts. The demo has been called by those trade unions at the front of fighting the cuts right now, with an appeal to all workers and community campaigns to come along with them.

This is why the National Shop Stewards Network has called an anti-cuts conference on 22 January, appealing to all trade unionists and anti-cuts campaigns – so that the might of organised working class people is at the heart of an anti-cuts movement, which draws together trade unionists and community campaigners into a formidable force. Unity must be built around a clear programme: opposition to all cuts and all job losses. Adopting the position that some cuts are necessary, no matter how small, will doom the movement to defeat. What will the movement say to those fighting against a particular cut that others deem 'necessary'? Such a position will bring instant division and lead to impotence in organising action or risk a so-called anti-cuts movement being

viewed as irrelevant to the fight.

A mass campaign is needed to turn back these attacks. This was how Thatcher's hated poll-tax was defeated. As campaigns spring up to save services we need to organise anti-cuts unions to draw all the campaigns in a particular area together.

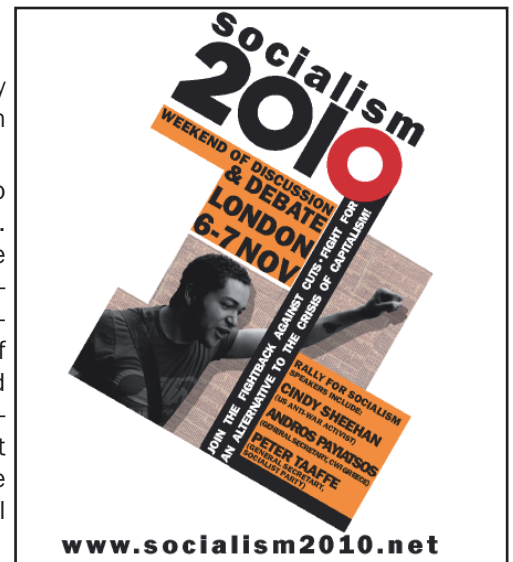
The trade unions have a central role to play. Workers need to organise to put pressure on their trade union leaders to act now. A national trade union-led demonstration, properly built for, could act as a lightning rod to the anger of millions and fire a warning-shot across the government's bows. The TUC national demonstration at the end of March 2011 is welcome, but too far away. We need a national demonstration now.

Coordinated strike action across the public sector is clearly on the table. A 24 -hour public sector general strike would be a massive show of strength on the part of the working class. The government would be terrified. Serious discussions within the public sector trade unions need to begin now about the best way of bringing this about. The promises to do this made by trade union leaders at the TUC in September need to be turned into a reality by pressure from below. General strikes in Greece, Spain, France and Portugal are meeting head-on the austerity budgets and slashing governments. These tremendous actions can and will develop in Britain too.

Who is there to vote for?

The Labour Party is opposing the Con-Dem cuts. But if Labour were in government they would be pushing their own cuts through just at a slower pace. In many areas, Labour run councils are the willing executors of Tory cuts.

The Socialist Party will work with Labour councillors and councils who are opposed to cuts and refuse to carry them out. But so far this is like trying to find a pig with wings. Come the next elections people will still be faced with the same old choice between the 'lesser of two evils'. We need to build a new political voice for working people. Labour-affiliated trade unions need to disaffiliate and campaign, along with others, for the building of a new mass workers party. Anti-cuts campaigns should start discussing now if they will stand in the May local elections. The Trade Unionist & Socialist Coalition stood over 40 candidates in the 2010 general election and represented an important step toward building a political voice for working class people. Crucially, TUSC included militant trade union leaders such as Bob Crow on its steering committee, and other leading trade unionists from the PCS and other unions. TUSC is organising a conference of potential candidates to take place early in 2011. Check website for updates.



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