

UK Labour Party attacks Greater Manchester firefighters

By Margot Miller
5 October 2016

The Labour Party-run Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority (GMFRA) has withdrawn its threat to sack all 1,250 firefighters, following an online petition signed by 20,000 people.

Fire chiefs have entered two weeks of talks with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) to discuss changes to the duty rota the GMFRA wishes to impose.

Unless they signed a new inferior contract, firefighters faced dismissal. The contract would change shift patterns to two 12-hour rosters and is part of a package of government cuts of £14.8 million over the next four years. These include 250 job losses already accepted by the FBU. This is on top of £28 million in cuts over the past six years.

Firefighters are opposed to the new shift pattern, as it would have a detrimental effect on family life, including incurring major childcare costs, as well as meaning cuts to the service during the night.

By 2019, Greater Manchester will have only 1,000 firefighters, less than half the 2,200 they had in 1996. Attacks on firefighters' jobs and conditions are being imposed in Fire Authorities nationwide. Devastating cuts are also being imposed in Scotland, and in Fire Authorities in the counties of Essex, Lincolnshire and Suffolk.

Since 2010, 10,000 firefighters have lost their jobs. In Greater Manchester, fire deaths have tripled in the past 12 months.

FBU leader Matt Wrack welcomed the talks as “allowing both parties to engage in discussions about the detail of the proposals to implement the planned cuts to the services budget without the threat of action by either party.”

The man who hails the FBUs efforts to suppress opposition from its members is politically aligned to the pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP) and close to the

Socialist Workers Party (SWP). After the withdrawal of the mass dismissal threat, the SP described this as a “victory” before adding that the GMFRA “have not retreated completely and are still likely to make cuts.” The SP is opposed to any independent struggle by workers to defend their jobs and livelihoods. Instead, they demand that workers “call on Labour Councillors that sit on the Fire Authority to oppose all cuts to jobs and services.”

The trade unions and the Labour Party have in reality played a critical role in the implementation of austerity since the £1 trillion bank bailout in 2008, through allowing or implementing the gutting of public services. The bailout was carried out by the Labour government of Gordon Brown, which imposed the first raft of austerity that has been continued by the Tories.

In 2011, the Trades Union Congress and affiliated trade unions demobilised a mass movement of public sector workers against attacks on their pensions after they had called only one coordinated day of national strike action in 2011. Each union finally made its own agreement with the respective employers to the detriment of their members' conditions of service.

Public sector workers, including firefighters, have had to work longer and pay higher contributions for a diminished pension, while essential services are teetering on the brink of collapse.

In an attempt to save face, as Labour lurched sharply to the right under Tony Blair, the FBU disaffiliated from the party in 2004. But with the election of “left” Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader in 2015, the FBU decided to re-affiliate. Corbyn personally welcomed the FBU back “after a 10-year absence” into “the Labour family” in a conference speech following his re-election as leader last month—a contest that was the outcome of a coup attempt by the right-wing.

He did so, even as one section of this “family” was threatening Greater Manchester firefighters with mass dismissal.

Since being first elected Corbyn has capitulated to the right wing on every issue, including keeping Trident nuclear weapons and allowing a free vote on bombing Syria. But the pseudo-left groups support Corbyn in order to maintain the fiction that Labour’s reformist past can be revived.

The SWP quoted Matt Wrack approvingly when he declared that the “left”—subordinate to the unions—need to “get stuck into the struggle to reshape the Labour Party.” He stated, “I think the left in the trade unions need to be organised politically. They need to be making demands of the trade union movement as a whole and then feeding that into the Labour Party.”

The attack on the firefighters in Greater Manchester, which as the numbers signing the petition attest is widely opposed by 2.5 million local population, represented an opportunity to draw a line in the sand against years of relentless austerity. Instead, Corbyn has diligently maintained his silence on their struggle. Likewise, Corbyn, who can draw audiences of thousands at a few hours notice, refused to mobilise support for the junior hospital doctors during their strikes. Instead, in line with the British Medical Association union bureaucracy, he insisted for a negotiated settlement.

Far from Labour offering any alternative to the government’s austerity, what is being shown in Greater Manchester is the real face of the “Labour family” everywhere as Labour councils collaborate with the trade unions to carry out the cuts required by central government and big business.

For example, Labour controlled Durham County Council plans to sack 2,700 teaching assistants as part of a cost-cutting plan in which they will only be paid in term-time. The intention is to reemploy them on inferior contracts, resulting in a 23 percent pay cut. The assistants are currently balloting to strike in opposition.

At Labour’s September conference a policy motion was passed insisting that Labour councils could not set “illegal budgets,” i.e., budgets challenging the cuts demanded by central government. Corbyn has no disagreement with the right wing on this score. Last autumn, he and his shadow chancellor John McDonnell

wrote to Labour councils warning them against setting illegal budgets. In March, McDonnell wrote a letter to all Labour-controlled Local Authorities instructing them to abide by the law and not raise deficit budgets and thus impose austerity cuts.

He also pledged that a Labour government would ensure that “at the end of every parliament, government debt as a proportion of trend GDP” would be “lower than it was at the start.”

Addressing his Blairite opponents in his re-election acceptance speech, Corbyn said, “Let’s wipe the slate clean. ...We have much more in common than that which divides us.” In this at least he speaks the truth.

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