

The firefighters' struggle -

the story so far ...

LITTLE COULD FIREFIGHTERS REALISE when they started out on their campaign for a pay rise that it would raise such a political storm. After all, meeting the claim would only add 41 pence a week to council tax bills.

Independent research showed that firefighters' wages had fallen sharply in comparison with the professional grade they are now bracketed with. The Fire Brigades Union produced reports that demonstrated the increased workload members faced and the new skills they had learned. Consultants were hired to show how a reorganisation of the service along the lines suggested by the FBU could save the government and the taxpayer £3 billion. There was no more the FBU could do in preparing a reasoned, rational case for a pay rise. As a result, firefighters voted by nearly nine to one to take strike action if necessary.

The only previous strike in 1977/78 was also under a Labour government. Callaghan's government had a narrow majority and was floundering in the midst of a world economic crisis. But this time around, in 2002, New Labour seemed to have loads of money and a huge majority and would not want a battle with a group that enjoys massive support in the communities they serve. Or so it seemed to many in the FBU. Warning signs were apparent as early as July when the government stepped in to prevent local authority employers from making a 16% offer that would have probably led to a

settlement. After talks broke down in September, the ballot was held and the FBU once again sought a negotiated settlement.

Several planned strikes were abandoned in the hope of reaching a deal. But New Labour was not at all interested in the FBU's rational arguments and well-researched documents. In the end, the FBU executive was left with no choice but to start industrial action. Even before the first 48-hour strike began in November, New Labour went on the offensive. Prime Minister Blair claimed that the 40% pay rise would cause "terrible damage" to the economy. Chancellor Brown said there would be no "quick fixes" over pay. Employers were told that the government would meet the full cost of using the army and their Green Goddesses at £6m a day. New Labour had politicised the dispute and put the government's economic policy and political authority on the line. They had another agenda - imposed "modernisation" which would undermine the FBU and introduce flexible working.

Andy Gilchrist, the FBU general secretary, responded by declaring: "Tony Blair took a 40% pay rise last year, boosting his pay by over £50,000 to £163,000 per year. There were no strings attached to his deal and no new working practices enforced. The Prime Minister's pay rise was more than the annual earnings of two professional firefighters put together. It is rank hypocrisy to attack public sector workers' pay claims when he has taken so much himself. Firefighters are furious.

"The government has set up a wide-ranging review into the UK Fire Service [under Sir George Bain] to stop our employers from negotiating with us. Sir Tony Young [a member of the review team] has already told

This pamphlet summarises the key lessons so far of the firefighters' pay struggle. It is written and produced by the *Movement for a Socialist Future* to take forward the discussion about how workers can create truly democratic and accountable forms of economic and political representation.

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us that we will not be happy with the outcome of the review. It's astonishing that he can say this before the team have even met. It is clear from the comments made by Tony Blair and Tony Young that this review has a pre-determined outcome. The FBU will be taking no part in this scandal."

Downing Street responded to the second strike by declaring that the FBU "could not win". It described the strikes as "wrong and dangerous". The government stepped in at the last moment to block a draft agreement worth 16% which gave the FBU some say in any changes in the fire service. The Governor of the Bank of England, the CBI and even the International Monetary Fund declared that such "inflationary" pay rises could "wreck the economy".

The army was praised and contrasted to the fire service; lies and disinformation led to a denigration of firefighters in the media, whipped up by the evil Downing Street spin machine. The FBU was accused of refusing to change, even though it proved how firefighters had responded to changes in the nature of their work. It even produced its own modernisation proposals.

'Modernisation' equals cost cutting

THE GULF BETWEEN the FBU's proposals and Bain's are well summarised by Roger Seifert, professor of industrial relations at Keele University. He says: "When it comes to public services, the government assumes that - everything else being equal - the private sector could provide a better service at lower costs to the taxpayer; and, where privatisation is not a viable option,

then the service should be managed and funded as if it were in the private sector. 'Efficiency' is seen as internal to each individual unit, on the model of the individual firm. Thus each school, foundation hospital or "modern" fire station ...is under pressure to cut costs and maximise output as a unit, without regard to the costs incurred elsewhere as a result of its decisions."

Seifert describes how New Labour creates a "cadre of super-managers" to make the "best" decisions about the allocation of resources basing them on "rational", market-based demands. The fire service is already going this way, with fire chiefs being paid as much as £100,000.

Seifert explains: "The fire service is one of the last refuges of efficiency based on both the needs of the public and the knowledge of the frontline workers. The Bain commission is intended to break this down. It is focused on the problem of labour costs - the biggest problem for new public management techniques in all public services." He adds: "It is this 'modernisation' that the firefighters are resisting, not modernisation as it is commonly understood. Far from it. If the past is anything to go by, it is the union that has been the driving force for change."

The message is clear: the government stands or falls on its policies of low wages, "flexible" working, weakened unions and privatisation. New Labour is neither *new* nor *labour*. It is not even a party or a form of government that firefighters - or anyone else for that matter - have experienced before.

New Labour does not have the mediating role in society which Old Labour governments had. The Blair-Brown philosophy is not about balancing competing interests between labour and the employers. It goes

End affiliation

My personal opinion is that when I give my hard earned money to an organisation, then I expect some sort of assistance or co-operation from that organisation. This is now the second National Firefighters strike, both have been against the Labour Party. It strikes me as odd that the people who have funded and supported an organisation for many years, should become the target for the absolute rubbish that has been said by Labour MP's, and especially the Deputy Prime Minister. I have stopped any of my money going to the party, and I will be encouraging my union to stop the affiliation all together.

I believe that the Labour Party of today is probably as bad, if not worse than some of the Tory party ideas towards the working man. It's typical that members of this government can vote themselves a 40% pay rise, and are now talking about a massive increase in their allowances, with no modernisation, in fact by cutting their own hours of work at the same time. Labour party HO assured me this was after an independent review, very much like the Bain review into the Fire Service. Somehow I find that impossible to believe.

Paul Brown Suffolk FBU

further than Thatcherism, which was more closely wedded to the interests of British capitalism. New Labour has tied its fortunes directly to capitalist-led globalisation. We are all supposed to love the market economy, in return for which we shall all prosper.

New Labour, as Paul Boateng, the chief secretary to the Treasury said recently, is in charge of Britain PLC. The country is viewed as a profit-making corporation with New Labour acting as the management team on behalf of the giant transnational firms and financiers that call the economic tune.

In the world of globalised capitalism, the role of the state is to facilitate the interests of capitalism directly. The state will definitely **not** provide adequate retirement pensions; it will **not** fund public services; it will **not** pay for the costs of higher education. We have to make our own arrangements - if we can. So we get private-public partnerships for the Tube, for hospitals, for schools and transport. Council services are contracted out and “Best Value” ensures that competition and efficiency dominate the agenda.

The Blairites insist that those who see a distinction between public and private are living in the past. What works is what counts, the mantra goes. Everything is designed to allow capitalist firms - who find it increasingly difficult in the wider economy - to make profits out of the public sector. As the firefighters have found out, New Labour does not negotiate over these questions. The government either stands or falls on this platform. New Labour aims to defeat the FBU to make sure that no one else challenges their policies. This dispute is not only political in the general sense, therefore, but will determine the future of the entire trade union movement.

The Bain report is an integral part of the Blair government’s agenda. It was set up to bypass the employers and create the platform for a complete rewriting of fire service conditions. Sir George, who is paid £160,000 as vice-chancellor of Queen’s University Belfast, was knighted by New Labour. He endorses their business language without reservations.

For example, the opening chapter of the final report says: “We believe that the service we describe will be able to meet current and future challenges **flexibly**; to offer challenging and well-rewarded work to a wide range of staff; and to respond to the need for **continuous improvements in performance** whether through working with others or **spreading good practice**. But the merits of **our vision** will count for nothing if what we propose is not put into practice.” (emphasis added)

Bain threat to FBU’s future

IMPLEMENTING BAIN amounts to destroying the existing fire service, along with thousands of jobs and fatally weakening the FBU. Proposals include a reduction in crewing levels at night, flexible shifts, merging of control centres, introduction of pre-arranged overtime and training as paramedics. Prescott has announced he will change the law to allow fire station closures to go through more easily. The FBU rightly boycotted the Bain inquiry because it lacked independence. But for the FBU to describe Bain as “irrelevant” does not convey the real intent. For the proposals will clearly become the basis of the pay offer the employers are preparing for the New Year.

The refusal of the government to allow a compromise

! National strike

I write to confirm that we are completely behind your efforts to get a decent wage as are most normal folk. This very dangerous work should be rewarded accordingly.

I was absolutely delighted to hear your recent comments regarding this so called Labour government. My husband and I have been Labour supporters for 45 years but have both resigned our membership this year.

If a new Party is not formed before the next General Election who can Old Labour supporters vote for? I would not vote for either of the two Conservative Parties and that would leave the Liberals who do not come up to my expectations anyway.

I must say I am surprised at the Unions putting up with the Government’s privatisation plans and still funding them. I think there should be a day’s National Strike called to show the Government exactly what the Unions think of their disgraceful treatment of the Firefighters.

Barbara Cork
from the FBU website !

stunned, surprised and then angered the FBU leadership, especially Gilchrist. Few in the trade unions have wanted to accept that New Labour is what it is, even though Blair makes no attempt to disguise the purpose of his government. What does a trade union do if it can't freely negotiate a deal with the employers? Preventing a settlement challenges the very purpose of trade unionism.

The FBU has run into a brick wall called New Labour. Other union leaders have literally queued up to express the view that the dispute concerns the wider labour movement. TUC general secretary John Monks, who helped broker the "deal" that the government refused to endorse, actually urged other unions to support the FBU.

RMT leader Bob Crow pledged solidarity and encouraged Tube drivers not to work if they considered fire cover was inadequate. During the first 48-hour strike, several drivers - acting on an individual basis - refused to take trains out. Before the second strike, management threatened to send drivers home without pay if they repeated their action. The RMT decided to call a ballot on industrial action as a result. On the eve of the ballot, Blair urged the Underground management to use the anti-union laws to block solidarity action by Tube drivers. RMT leaders, fearful of the anti-union laws, suspended the ballot to take "legal advice". This was a body blow to the FBU because it meant they were left to confront the government on their own. All Tube trains ran normally during the second strike.

Just as the second strike ended, Gilchrist laid into New Labour in no uncertain terms. He said he favoured a return to a party based on "real social progress, on real justice for working class people and indeed on fairness

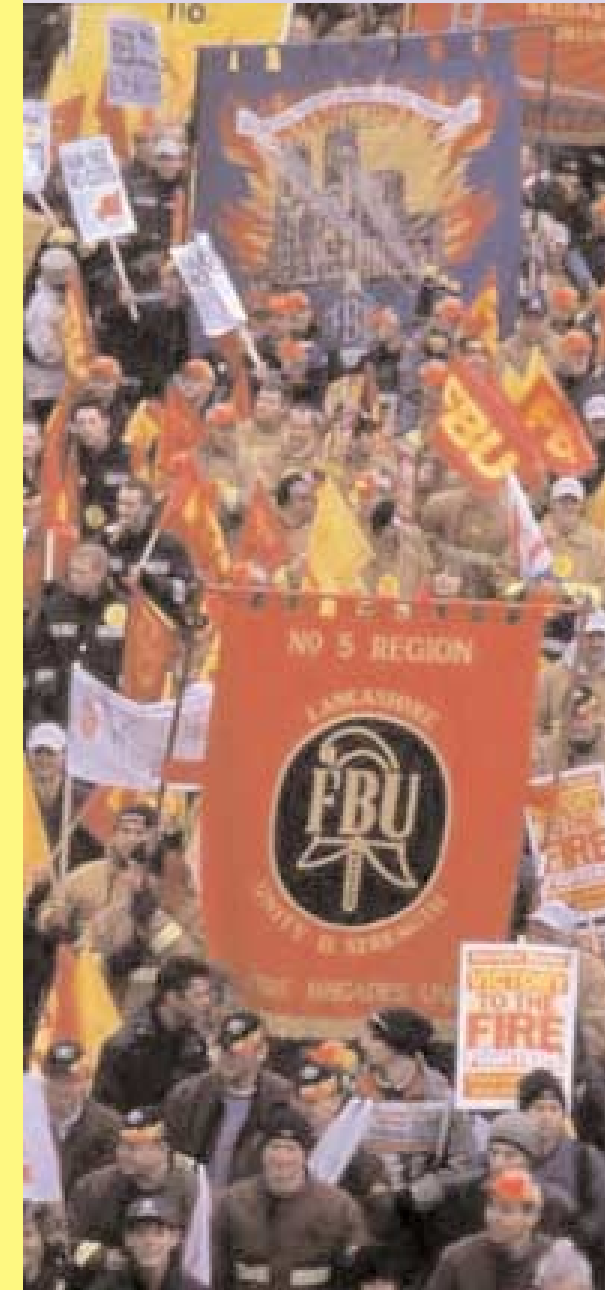
for all". He contrasted the money set aside for an attack on Iraq, where innocent civilians would die, with the denial of the firefighters' claim. He called for a debate on the links between unions and Labour.

This justified response to continuing attacks by the government sent alarm bells ringing at Congress House, the TUC headquarters. Brendan Barber, who is to succeed Monks at the TUC, warned that the dispute was in "danger of becoming too politicised". Pressure was applied to use Acas, the arbitration service headed by a former TUC president. On the Monday, the FBU executive postponed strikes due before Christmas to give negotiations one more chance.

Firefighters cannot win on their own

SOME DISAPPOINTED ACTIVISTS saw this as a "betrayal" and the leadership as "cowards" who had no stomach for the fight. A range of left-wing groups urged firefighters to "stand firm" and "not give in". These reactions are unhelpful and imply that the FBU through more strike action can actually defeat the government. This is clearly not the case. The FBU cannot defeat the government on its own.

Without leadership from their own leaders, other trade unionists are unlikely to take action. Yet FBU leaders are reluctant to make this call. Perhaps they have been told privately that it is too dangerous to risk union assets in solidarity action. Either way, the decision not to ask other unions for support is a serious under-estimation of the nature of the dispute and how it can be won. Acas only postpones having to face up to the real nature of New Labour and what this means for the future of the



trade unions and trade unionism.

There is serious concern among trade union leaders about the existing relationship with New Labour. Many have hoped - at least in private - that a show of trade union power could help weaken the Blairites' grip on the government and party. This would create the conditions for a revived, more radical party to emerge under the umbrella of the trade unions. Firefighters were cast as the "shock troops" in this scenario.

This scenario clearly remains in the land of fantasy. Despite bailing New Labour out of its current financial crisis, the unions have got nothing in return. The resolution on PFI carried at the party conference is gathering dust somewhere, while the government steps up the involvement of the private sector in the NHS and education.

No going back to 'Old Labour'

UNION LEADERS REFUSE TO ACKNOWLEDGE that the party they helped found a century ago has abandoned these historic ties and is on another course altogether. They are desperate to convince themselves that this is not so, because that would mean having to discuss possible alternatives.

Because history moves on, it is actually not possible to return to the pre-Blair days. The Blairites are in power because they speak the language of and act in the interests of capitalist-led globalisation. This is not a conspiracy but an expression of the world we live in. The material conditions for reform-minded governments simply do not exist any more and cannot be made to reappear within the present economic and

political framework.

The changed nature of the party itself also serves as a reminder that, in any case, the machinery simply does not exist to "recapture" the party. The Blairites dominate the party at local level following the 40% fall in individual membership. Political life in constituency parties is negligible. Conference has less say in policy than ever before and the vast bulk of the parliamentary party supports the leadership, as does the sidelined National Executive.

If the leadership is worried about the ties with New Labour, it has cause to be. Its members are demanding change. The FBU conference last year agreed a resolution which called for its political fund to be used only to support candidates and organisations which support union policies. Unison, the Communication Workers Union and the RMT rail union have all had discussions about future funding, while the GMB has already slashed its funding by £1m. At the level of rank and file trade unionists, the relationship with New Labour is slight. Fewer and fewer trade unionists attend local meetings. It is harder to find individual members of the party. Firefighters do not see New Labour as **their** party or one that represents their interests and aspirations. In this respect, they are way ahead of their leaders. Many are determined to end the union's formal affiliation to New Labour.

In 10 days of strike action firefighters have helped raise the question of alternative political representation to the top of the agenda. They have also prompted a debate on what kind of society we want to live in. Gilchrist's vision of a fair society looking after all sections in the community is as far removed from Britain 2003 as you can get. The FBU's modernisation

! It's political

Unlike last time, when a small section of us thought it was a political argument rather than an argument over wages, the vast majority of us know now that it has become a political argument.

To a person, everyone has asked that we withdraw our total contribution to the Labour Party and use it to finance a lobbying group.

David Rowson
West Norwood FBU
from the MSF website !

! 'Tory' Blair

Having been a Labour supporter all my life, I no longer do. Blair is more TORY than the Tories are. Stop all trades union contributions to Labour and continue to expose their hypocrisy in obtaining large pay increases for themselves whilst denying firefighters a decent wage. Good luck in your fight (I'm a policeman, so it's not only firefighters and trades unionists that recognise the justice of your struggle).

Thomas Campbell
from the FBU website !

! Withdraw funds

We all pay as part of our union subscription a political levy that goes straight into Labour Party coffers. We've all said here that's got to end. We are so angry with the way the party founded by trade unionists has treated us.

Trevor Corfield
Chelsea FBU
from the MSF website !

approach is unachievable in today's Britain because it challenges the very basis of New Labour thinking and demands a say by workers in how services are provided.

The British working class struggled in a mass way for political representation in the Chartist movement in the 19th century. But winning universal suffrage by the last quarter of the 19th century was not enough to change things. That is why the working class and trade unions had to found the Labour Party, which was a great step forward. New Labour's rejection of its ties with the trade unions marks the end of a century of parliamentary struggles. We should not mourn this, but turn it into an opportunity to create an organisation which can take forward not only the trade unions but society as a whole.

These issues are faced by increasing numbers of voters. That is why only 59% bothered to turn out at the last general election - it is certain to be much lower next time. Many voters feel powerless and as a result are effectively disenfranchised. Their vote has lost any real meaning in a world where corporate interests and commercial considerations dominate every sphere of social life - public as well as private.

Going beyond New Labour

THAT IS WHY WE NEED to focus on how to move **beyond** New Labour and setting social objectives **beyond** capitalist-led globalisation. Disaffiliation from New Labour is a step in this direction. Campaigns to "democratise" the political fund are important but do not take the debate far enough.

Redeploying funds to organisations and candidates which support union policies fudges the fundamental

question facing unions - ending the relationship to New Labour. Disaffiliation, on the other hand, brings to the front the issue of what is to actually **replace** New Labour and the role of the unions in this process. Without this call, the campaign is restricted to supporting elements of New Labour like individual MPs or one-off campaigns or left-wing groups.

New Labour faces increasing difficulties. Their market-led "solutions" are making matters worse in a number of areas. On pensions, for example, the policy is now reduced to "work until you drop", postponing retirement indefinitely. This is an admission that neither the present state nor the private sector is capable of providing for people in older age.

The coming Anglo-American attack on Iraq is another indication of the tensions and crisis in the global economy. The "values" of the market economy so loved by Bush and Blair, and their corporate friends, are to be imposed by force in a new imperial enterprise aimed at control of Iraq's oil fields.

All this is taking place in the context of a growing economic and environmental crisis, for which workers, as usual, will be expected to pay. This is why the *Movement for a Socialist Future* believes a turning point in history has arrived. We cannot live in the old way, within the existing political and economic set-up; humanity has to break free from these shackles and move forward.

When an anonymous minister says the strike is also "a political battle about the future direction of the country" this is absolutely right. That is why in challenging New Labour we must also open up a discussion on alternatives to an economic system that cannot provide for basic needs.

Start new party

I fully support the ever increasing view that all Trade Unionists should now campaign to put the boot into this joke of a Labour Party (financially).

We don't need them - but they need our cash!!! The way the FBU have been portrayed is nothing short of criminal. Let's fully fund the strike with what would have been the cash going to keep the Labour Party from becoming bankrupt. They are having a go at all of us and using the FBU as an example. Start a new party. Give John Monks the leader's job and put up TUC candidates at the next general election. They are selling us down the river - do the same to Johnny 2 Jags & Co.

Mike Tansey
UNIFI
from the FBU website

Tell the truth

The media says Andy made a mistake by his statement about New Labour vs Real Labour. The mistake - if mistake it was, was to tell the truth.

If Andy or anyone else wants to start the Real Labour Party, he will have a lot of support. If there is anything I can do to help your action, please let me know.

Dave Shotten
Ex-political Education Officer, City of Durham CLP
Ex-assistant County Secretary, National Union of Teachers
from the FBU website

There is also a need to evaluate existing political institutions to see whether they offer a way forward. There is plenty of evidence that demonstrates that the House of Commons, the Lords, the monarchy and the rest act as theatrical props while real power is exercised elsewhere. We don't even have Cabinet government any longer, with the emergence of a presidential-style rule, first under Thatcher and now through Blair. Local government funding is controlled by Whitehall and councils have little power over services. There is a case for alternative, truly democratic executive bodies at local and regional level.

These are the key themes of a conference planned for Spring 2003. Sponsors will include the *Charter for Basic Democratic Rights*, the *Movement for a Socialist Future* and trade unionists, including a number of firefighters. We hope that the conference, provisionally

called “Voices for the Future”, can discuss a range of issues, including:

- Political representation beyond New Labour
- Assessing the value of existing political structures
- Democratic alternatives to rule by the corporations

Please get in touch with us for more information about the conference. We hope to see you there.

For conference details please contact the Campaign Co-ordinator on:

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I've resigned

I have been a member of the Party since 1969, when I joined in Nottingham North. I have worked at all levels of the Party up to and including Regional Executive (East Mids) and have served as an officer at Branch and CLP level (inc Chair and Secretary - Mansfield). I have also spent 16 years representing the Party as a Councillor, and was pleased and proud to do so when nationally we couldn't get elected, and, in the case of Mansfield, in the face of opposition from the Moderate Labour party and the UDM.

I have seen the influence of members in the Party dwindle down to nothing; of course the unions were too influential and was pleased to see a better balance struck, but even that is ineffective now with Conference decisions either being avoided or ignored. Party members' wishes count for nothing now.

I have swallowed some bitter pills to see that happen, too numerous to mention, in terms of policy changes, but the way the FBU and its members are being treated now is just too big a pill to swallow. It seems to epitomise all the disappointments I have with the Labour Party and its attitudes towards the unions and the Party's natural supporters now it is in power.

I would be grateful therefore if you would arrange for my Party membership (Membership No A101245) to not be renewed.

I will not be joining any other Party, indeed I hope to remain a Labour voter, but I cannot stand by and see good people being destroyed in the name of New Labour. This is the only form of protest I have as a member of the Party, any other way ordinary members had has long been diluted to the extent it is meaningless.

Bob Birch
from the FBU website