

Firefighters' National Strike Looms in Britain

by Alan Clayton

It is perhaps one of these endless human paradoxes that the impending firefighters' strike in the United Kingdom had its origins in the tragic events in the New York and Washington Sept. 11 last year. Indeed, even the noun "firefighters" has totally replaced "firemen" in the English lexicon of North America.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) in Britain has very effectively exploited the huge wave of international sympathy and admiration for the men who so courageously entered mortally damaged buildings in order to save human life, many giving their own lives in doing so. Members of the New York Fire Department have been invited to numerous well-publicized events organized by local fire brigades (the appellation "brigade" rather than "department" still remains in Britain) throughout the United Kingdom, and the level of public sympathy for the firefighters is now considerable.

'Green Goddesses' Will See Action

The standard of living of U.K. firefighters has fallen considerably over past years, due substantially to the world economic crisis, which is having a particularly significant effect in areas of the economy of the United Kingdom. Firefighters work a shift system, based on 48 hours on-duty followed by 48 hours off-duty, with one or two rest days. It has allowed firefighters in areas outside big cities, where callouts are not so heavy and regular, the ability to have second jobs as taxi drivers, bus drivers, local handymen etc. But the poor economic situation has made "moonlighting" of this kind increasingly difficult to find, forcing firefighters to live on their basic, fairly poor salary.

The government, after rejecting union demands for a 40% salary increase, has set up an independent review of firefighters' pay. But the FBU has refused to recognize the review, chaired by Sir George Bain, former chairman of the Low Pay Commission. Bain's report, expected in December, is likely to put forward a compromise under which firemen will get more than the 4% government-backed offer, in exchange for updating working practices. But a ballot of firefighters by the FBU returned a huge majority in favour of industrial action long before December, and there will be 36 days of one- or two-day strikes, and then eight-day strikes, by the U.K.'s 52,000 firefighters right up until Christmas Eve.

The Green Goddesses, military fire engines which are almost 50 years old, will see action unless an increasingly

unlikely settlement occurs. The government's alternative firefighter service—some 800 Green Goddesses manned by troops—will be stretched to the breaking point if the FBU's six planned strikes go ahead. The union's surprise decision to hold two 48-hour strikes, followed by four eight-day strikes, is far more severe than ministers were expecting.

The Ministry of Defence will deploy 12,500-20,000 Armed Services personnel to fight fires, "replacing" the 52,000-strong civilian brigades. The Green Goddess engines have no radios, a maximum speed of 50 mph, and dangerously outdated braking systems which make them difficult to stop on downhill runs. They were last used in the full-scale firefighters' strike of 1978, and were shown to be hopelessly outdated then. However, there was limited use of them last year in a firefighters' strike in the northeastern city of Liverpool, a fact that the government is trying very hard at this time to keep out of the public domain, because they were responding to only about 30% of emergency calls in Liverpool, according to the FBU. The other 70% of calls were not being attended.

Cobra and National Emergency

Fire brigades throughout the U.K. have more than 3,000 modern engines equipped with the latest firefighting equipment, including breathing apparatus. Prime Minister Tony Blair has insisted that troops will be ready to take over on Oct. 29, the day of the first action. The Ministry of Defence, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Cabinet Office are drawing up plans for how long troops would be deployed, and whether they would go back to their barracks between strikes.

In most cases soldiers will be deployed near their existing barracks. Sir David Omand, the Permanent Secretary at the Cabinet Office, has been coordinating contingency measures, using a committee with the sinister-sounding name of "Cobra," that is "Cabinet Office Briefing Room A." The situation could escalate to the national emergency and near martial law crisis of the 1999-2000 foot-and-mouth disease epidemic. Cobra was last convened immediately after Sept. 11, 2001, when it was felt that the United Kingdom was going to suffer similar attacks.

Cobra has emphasised that troops will only be using the Green Goddesses, as soldiers breaking picket lines to take out the modern equipment is, some commentators think, fraught with political danger, and could precipitate a national strike such as Britain has not seen since the years of brutal austerity following World War I.

In the case of major fires and road accidents, troops will be backed up by Royal Air Force helicopters. "Great Britain would not be Great Britain, however, without the element of tragicomedy, and in Northern Ireland the Green Goddesses will be painted yellow, because of the association of green with the Republic of Ireland and the possibility they will be stoned or fired on by Protestant militants assuming they are manned by Catholics.

These decisions by army planners were seized upon by one military analyst as a telling sign of "overstretch." Stuart Crawford, a retired lieutenant colonel in the royal tank regiment, said: "This is a clear sign that the British army is being stretched far too far by the commitments this government is expecting of it. Our forces are at their lowest strength for years and yet we are being expected to maintain a presence in places such as the Balkans and also cover emergencies at home." Crawford said it seemed ludicrous that the army had to rely on troops from Germany, who might expect to be part of any attack on Iraq, to become emergency firefighters, but that the deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland makes any withdrawal of troops from there out of the question.

Iraq Implications

Bernard Jenkin, the Tory MP and Defence spokesman, said: "I suppose there is a kind of logic in this idea, but this type of logistical nightmare underlines how overstretched Britain's armed forces are." Paul Keetch, the Liberal Democrat Defence spokesman, who believes Britain's armed forces are being starved of resources, said, "It is ironic that Britain's possible contribution to any military action in Iraq may not be determined by the House of Commons or even the Prime Minister, but by the actions of the Fire Brigades Union." American warhawks, take note. A Ministry of Defence spokesperson said: "We have a considerable number of troops in Germany, which we consider to be in easy reach of the U.K. We have been given a number of operational tasks . . . and we don't think we should have people sitting around in Britain just waiting for fire strikes to happen."

Jock Munro, treasurer of the Fire Brigades Union in Scotland, has attacked the proposed use of army fire engines. Civilian engines shoot out water at a pressure of 400 pounds per square inch, while Green Goddesses only produce a pressure of 80 psi. "If they try to use our equipment" said Munro, "we would black the equipment after the strike, refusing to use them." He added, "We will also blockade or occupy fire stations if they put soldiers in them."

The potential for national emergency can be seen with even a cursory look at the potential knock-on effects. The Euro Tunnel, the London Underground, airports, and ports could all be affected if workers fear that fire safety is being compromised. Sports stadiums may close if there are concerns that spectators could not be evacuated effectively, while theatres, cinemas, and restaurants could also face limited operations. Operations in dangerous areas of industry such as petrochemicals may also be curbed. Health and safety regulations, which permit any employee to leave their workplace if they have a legitimate safety concern, could be used to suspend work. Much of such action will be seen as secondary and supportive, and while such action is illegal, walkouts over safety could not be challenged by employers, in the opinion of leading trades union lawyers.

Disruption also could be much worse than that caused by the last firefighters' national strike 25 years ago, because of

all the additional fire safety legislation. Awareness has been heightened by the series of serious accidents which led to much of the legislation. They include the Bradford City football fire in 1985 which killed 56 people; the fire at King's Cross Underground station in London which killed 31 in 1987; and the Hillsborough football disaster in 1989, in which 95 people were crushed to death.

The support of other trade unions will be key to the knock-on effect of the firefighters' dispute. The rail unions have pledged strong support for the firefighters, as has the moderate Trades Union Congress, although decisions about any safety action will be left to individual members and safety representatives.

National Coordination of Action

Hilary Campion, an employment law partner at Eversheds, a firm which has advised companies on anti-union action, said: If employees walk out over safety issues, then employers would not be able to take any action, except where those concerns were proven to be unfounded. Then they could only act against individuals for breach of contract; the union itself would not be vulnerable. Although any action would be legally and technically done by individuals, it is likely that national union leaders will exert influence behind the scenes. Andy Gilchrist, general secretary of the FBU, is part of a strong and growing caucus of anti-Blair leaders in the union movement that includes the rail unions, the Civil Service union PCS, and a number of key figures in other unions.

Mick Rix, general secretary of the ASLEF rail union, pledged support in a letter to the FBU. A spokesman for the RMT rail workers said that members would be highly concerned at fire safety cover provided by the Army in Green Goddess fire engines. "With all respect, a bunch of hastily trained squaddies in state-of-the-ark technology cannot help provide the cover we would want."

The Transport and General Workers Union is expected to coordinate an existing pay dispute on the Glasgow metro to cause maximum disruption during firefighters' strike days; it also has drivers on the Euro Tunnel, who have been discussing safety provisions with managers.

Euro Tunnel said that it would run a normal service during fire strikes. However, Green Goddesses are too big to go into the tunnel, and to do so requires specialist engines operated by the FBU. A spokeswoman said that there would be no

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attempts to fight a fire, but that Euro Tunnel staff would help to evacuate people into the “safe haven” middle tunnel. French firefighters have pledged not to tackle any fires in the section of the tunnel covered by their English colleagues. The London Underground has already laid out plans to close 19 of its deep-level stations, and said that its service will be substantially reduced.

Political Chaos

The government has launched a huge public safety campaign as senior ministers struggle to control a dispute they fear could cause widespread loss of life. Alistair Darling, the Transport Secretary, said the risk of extra deaths was so high that motorists should drastically reduce their speed on strike days. Darling said: “People need to bear in mind that every day of this year, the fire brigades are called out to cut people out of wreckage and when they’re on strike, they will not be doing that.”

The government’s tough line was aimed at increasing the moral pressure on the Fire Brigades Union to call off the strike, but it appears that the gulf between the two sides was wider than ever. Opposition parties have accused the government of mishandling the dispute and allowing the return of 1970s militant trade unionism.

John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, warned that the “risk of loss of life and property will be higher.” Prescott told Parliament the FBU’s position was “simply indefensible,” and added its threatened industrial action was “completely unnecessary and completely unjustified. . . . My message to the FBU is, think again.”

Transport Secretary Darling said road users would have to be extra-vigilant: “In the event of serious accidents where the fire brigades would be on hand to remove the wreckage, then, of course, there are still other agencies who could do that. But we need to pay close attention to that.” Jack McConnell, Scotland’s First Minister, took part in a ministerial summit at Downing Street to discuss the strike threat. He called on the FBU to take part in the independent pay review.

As the government attempts to tackle the FBU head-on, it was accused by the Conservatives of plunging Britain back into “the dark days of the 1970s, when trades union bosses held the country to ransom and the picket line called the shots.” It would be hard to find a European nation less likely or able to support the American administration, if it decided to proceed with hostilities against Iraq over the next few months, than Britain.

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