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To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

New anti-worker legislation planned; Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill

On 10 January 2023, business secretary Grant Shapps introduced new anti-union laws designed to undermine the right of firefighters and other workers from taking legal, legitimate strike action in defence of our living standards. The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill has its second reading scheduled for today.

Minimum service requirements restrict trade union members' right to strike and limit the likelihood of effective strikes. They do this by imposing minimum levels of cover.

The Westminster government puts public safety at risk

Shapps claimed he is only introducing these laws to keep the public safe. He accuses strikers of playing politics with people's lives. This is rank hypocrisy.

Shapps has been in and out of government since 2010. His governments have put the public at greater risk every day of their administrations by:

- Central funding cuts to fire and rescue services of 30% in money terms.
- Cutting one-in-five (20%) or nearly 12,000 firefighter jobs.
- Closing nearly 50 fire stations in England.
- Removing more than 200 fire appliances in England.
- Fire response times to incidents at least 10% slower for the first appliance (and no figures for other appliances).
- Privatisation, deregulation and contracting out of fire safety, control rooms and training.

The FBU has warned repeatedly about the risks to public safety. Suddenly, when firefighters are forced to ballot for strike action to save our service and our livelihoods, ministers remember safety.

If ministers want to help with public safety every day of the year they should invest in the fire and rescue service, not cut it to pieces.

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Why ministers are doing this now?

Shapps has introduced these proposed laws when workers are facing an inflation rate currently more than 10% and expected by the Westminster government's own watchdog the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) to remain high into next year.

While firefighters and other workers are forced to use food banks, choose between heating and eating, millionaire ministers tell us to accept our fate and wait for the rainbow.

Ministers are imposing these restrictions to cut our wages now and in future; their whole strategy for workers is to drive down wages.

The Westminster government imposed a two year pay freeze for 2010 and 2011 on all public sector workers. Between 2012 and 2017, it imposed a 1% pay cap. It has kept tight limits on funding.

The real terms cut in firefighters' pay since 2010 (as measured by CPI) is 12% and will get worse.

If firefighters had received pay rises in line with CPI inflation since 2010, pay would be £4,000 higher.

How can we afford these pay rises?

Ministers claim central government can't afford pay rises.

- The wage bill for the UK fire and rescue service is £2.25bn.
- Each 1% pay rise for firefighters would cost £22.5m.

Decent pay is completely affordable.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) says that an inflation-matching pay award to all public sector workers would cost £18 billion. Ministers claim it could cost £28bn (ignoring the tax returned from higher wages).

The day after Shapps brought forward his new anti-union laws, the Westminster Public Accounts Committee revealed that an eye-watering £42 billion in unpaid taxes are owed to the HMRC.

Separately, the Wealth Tax Commission report, *A wealth tax for the UK* (2020) estimated that more than £30 billion could be raised if ministers:

- Equalise capital gains with income tax rates.
- Apply national insurance to investment income.
- Apply a 1% wealth tax on assets over £10 million.
- End the inheritance tax loopholes that benefit the already wealthy.
- Reform the rules on non-dom status.

Aren't there already arrangements in place?

The FBU has already negotiated a major incident agreement with fire employers in the event of forthcoming strike action, as the union has always done. This is publicly available. See All Members circular 2022HOC0639AD, 23 December 2022.

Every two years, the fire minister in England gives an assurance to parliament under Section 25 of the Fire and Rescue Services Act that the service is resilient and able to tackle any emergencies.

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For years, chief fire officers have assured ministers that they have “business continuity” arrangements in place for contingencies, including industrial action.

However, the best way to avoid such challenges is to ensure firefighters are paid a decent professional wage for the essential work they do.

Minimum service levels in Europe

Ministers say there are minimum service levels in some European countries. The FBU has strong links with firefighter unions in Europe and is aware that some European countries require some sort of minimum service provision.

However, in Germany, France, Italy and Spain the right to strike is ***guaranteed by their constitutions***.

In Italy, minimum service arrangements are set out in collective agreements between unions and employers.

In Spain, where minimum service levels imposed can be excessive, they are appealed by the trade unions in the courts.

Workers in Europe work in an industrial relations climate with more collective bargaining and negotiation.

But firefighters still take strike action – mostly recently in Italy and France.

The reality in Europe is a world away from the anti-union laws faced by workers in the UK. Shapps cherry picks conveniently from Europe. But he wants to level down to the worst cases, rather than allow unions the opportunity to sort out any arrangements.

Negotiations, not authoritarian repression

Trade unionists across the UK face already some of the most restrictive anti-union laws in Europe. Firefighters consider carefully and vote democratically before taking strike action.

Shapps’ new laws would give ministers wide powers to weaken and interfere with action. They are another desperate act of an authoritarian government out of touch with working people.

Removing legal protections for firefighters for defending our standard of living will not settle the dispute. Central government funding for decent pay offers, along with serious negotiation between unions and employers, is the way forward.

Firefighters will rightly resist these assaults on our collective, democratic rights to have a voice and to take industrial action.

Yours in unity



Matt Wrack
General Secretary