

British firefighters vote to stage nation-wide strikes over pay after 20 years



A police officer and firefighters work near the scene where a fire broke out in a railway arch, in

London (Photo by Reuters)

London, January 31 (RHC)-- British firefighters have voted for nationwide strikes across the UK in a row over pay for the first time in 20 years after an “overwhelming” ballot result. According to the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), firefighters delivered a decisive mandate on Monday, with 88 percent voting Yes for strike action, on a 73 percent turnout.

Strikes could take place as soon as 23 February after the rejection of a 5 percent pay offer, sources said. However, FBU says it will not call action if a “significantly improved offer” is made before 9 February.

Depicting the vote as “overwhelming”, Matt Wrack, the FBU’s general secretary, said the ballot was a last resort for members who had lost at least 12 percent of the value of their pay since 2010.

“The responsibility for any disruption to services lies squarely with fire service employers and government ministers. Rishi Sunak’s government has refused to make funding available for a decent pay offer to firefighters and control staff,” Wrack said. “Firefighters were among Britain’s Covid heroes who kept frontline services going during the pandemic. The prime minister has badly misjudged the public mood by imposing pay cuts on key workers,” he added.

Military troops may be deployed in some parts of the country to cover “high-risk calls” in the event of industrial action. The head of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has said the army will be formally requested to provide cover in Northern Ireland unless unions agree to do so.

Guardian newspaper reported last week that any request for troops would raise “serious security concerns” and could be “politically explosive” as dissident republicans have warned they would target any British troops who returned to the “island of Ireland.” The result of the ballot comes as the conservative government is under intense pressure to end a wave of public sector strikes, with a fresh round of industrial action due to take place on Wednesday.

During the past months, the UK has been grappling with its biggest strike wave for decades, with airport baggage handlers, border staff, driving instructors, bus drivers, and postal workers walking off their jobs to demand higher pay, to be able to cope with the soaring inflation and worsening cost-of-living crisis.

As a far-fetched solution to the dispute, the government is set to unveil strike legislation in the near future in order to contain industrial actions in its key sectors, forcing the staff to maintain a basic level of service during strike time or face dismissal.

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