



Strikes and trade unions Struck out

Industrial action prompts calls to toughen union laws

Nov 4th 2010 | from PRINT EDITION



Rex Features

When Green Goddesses roamed the earth

EVERY year, as bonfire night approaches, Britons are warned about the dangers of fireworks and accidental conflagrations. This year Londoners would do well to pay close attention. On November 1st around 5,500 firemen downed hoses for an eight-hour strike as part of a dispute over working hours. As *The Economist* went to press, another strike was planned to start on November 5th.

Choosing Bonfire Night is deliberately provocative: London's firemen typically deal with three times as many calls on November 5th as on normal nights. Worse, the soldiers who provided cover in past strikes are already stretched, and the ancient Green Goddess fire engines they once piloted (see picture) have been sold. Instead, a bare-bones service will if necessary be provided by a private firm. The strike—and the prospect of others, as unions prepare to battle public-spending cuts—have led to calls for tougher laws.

Nadhim Zahawi, a Conservative MP who takes a keen interest in the emergency services, thinks firemen should be forbidden from striking, on the grounds that they provide an essential service. Soldiers, policemen and prison warders are already barred. Boris Johnson, the mayor of London, suggested in October that Tube workers (who walked out on November 2nd in an unrelated dispute) should be included in the proscription, too. The Confederation of British Industry, an employers' body, wants the law changed to make it harder to strike, by requiring at least 40% of union members to vote in a strike ballot for it to be lawful.

It is hard to see why firemen should be permitted to strike when policemen and soldiers can't. Some other countries are less tolerant. American public-transport workers generally cannot strike. Many individual states have their own prohibitions: government employees in New York, for instance, are forbidden from walking out. Sarah Veale of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) points out that the European Convention on Human Rights explicitly protects workers' right to withdraw their labour. But strike bans can be justified on national-security grounds: in strike-happy France, some firemen are covered by one.

But in most other ways British union laws are already among the toughest in the developed world, says Richard Hyman of the London School of Economics. In contrast to

Related topics

[Trades Union Congress \(TUC, UK\)](#)

[Europe](#)

[France](#)

[London](#)

[United Kingdom](#)

[Comment \(2\)](#)

[E-mail](#)

[Print](#)

[Recommend \(7\)](#)

[Share](#)

[Reprints & permissions](#)

Advertisement

Most commented

[Most recommended](#)

1. [Caption competition: Caption competition 4](#)
2. [The euro area: Time for Plan B](#)
3. [Competition: Help us name our new defence blog](#)
4. [Turkey and Armenia: Two vast and ugly blocks of stone](#)
5. [Banyan: Tiger cubs v precious lambs](#)
6. [German politics: Will the eagle crash-land?](#)
7. [Global warming: Climate change and evolution](#)
8. [Indian nationalism in Kashmir: A most unwelcome tricolour](#)
9. [Silvio Berlusconi's scandals: A party animal](#)
10. [Al Jazeera and the Palestinians: The Palestine papers](#)

Over the past five days

Advertisement

Latest blog posts

-All times are GMT

[Redevelopment with a human face?](#)

From [Asia view](#) -31 mins ago

[Chronicle of a debt foretold](#)

From [Biighty](#) -39 mins ago

[The strongest girls in the world](#)

From [Bagehot's notebook](#) -1hour 58 mins ago

[Double-barrelled consequences of procrastination](#)

other European countries such as France and Italy, Britain's common law recognises no formal right to strike. In theory, unions can be sued for inducing workers to breach their contracts, says Nicholas Lakeland, an employment lawyer at Silverman Sherliker. Unions can immunise themselves by following elaborate procedures, but officials complain that doing so is hellishly bureaucratic. "I'm not sure there's ever been a strike that's been 100% legal," says one TUC official.

Although it might appeal to many commuters and voters, further tightening of the law could provoke legal challenges. In any case, the law and reality often differ: despite being forbidden from striking, prison warders walked out in 2007 over a pay dispute. Ministers chose to negotiate. Vital workers whom the government might ban from striking are precisely those who can cause the most damage if they do so anyway. "Even if official action is proscribed," says Mr Hyman, "that could just lead to unofficial strikes, which would be much harder to cope with."

from PRINT EDITION | Britain

[Recommend \(7\)](#) [E-mail](#) [Share](#) [Print](#) [Reprints & permissions](#)

Related items

TOPIC: Trades Union Congress (TUC, UK) »

Labour's leadership race: And the winner is...

Angry trade unions: The comrades take on the coalition

BAstrike: No strikes today

TOPIC: Europe »

A new species of human: The old man of the mountain returns

Hungary's media law: All eyes on Orbán

Belarus: No business as usual

TOPIC: France »

High-speed rail and the culture war: Why all the whinging about high-speed rail?

Britain and the EU: Happy on the sidelines

The Bank of England's financial stability report: Shafts of light between the storm clouds

TOPIC: London »

Heathrow's chaos: Snow go at Heathrow

Vince Cable: Who is to blame for Vince Cable's spectacular indiscretions?

The business secretary survives: Vince Cable's brush with political mortality

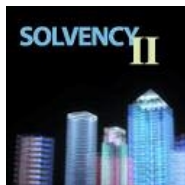
More related topics: [United Kingdom](#) | [Western Europe](#)

Readers' comments

Readers have commented on this article (the window for new comments is now closed).

[View all comments \(2\)](#)

Want more? [Subscribe to The Economist](#) and get the week's most relevant news and analysis.



From [Asia view](#) -January 28th, 06:22

What is real? In China, the artist decides
From [Prospero](#) -January 28th, 05:36

A fine balance
From [Prospero](#) -January 28th, 02:09

Mexico's presidential campaign, Canadian politics, executive pay in Brazil and guerrilla miners
From [Americas view](#) -January 27th, 23:51

[More from our blogs »](#)

Products & events

Stay informed today and every day

Subscribe to The Economist's free e-mail newsletters and alerts.

[Get e-mail newsletters](#)

Subscribe to The Economist's latest article postings on Twitter

[Follow The Economist on Twitter](#)

See a selection of The Economist's articles, events, topical videos and debates on Facebook.

[Follow The Economist on Facebook](#)

Advertisement

Classified ads



FedEx delivers to a changing world.

