

TUC CONGRESS: FBU PROMOTES FIREFIGHTER AND PUBLIC SAFETY



FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack called on delegates at the TUC Congress in Brighton this week to support the Union in a campaign to improve the safety of the public in high rise buildings and firefighters responding to incidents in these dwellings, and also highlighted the dangers of tea light candles.

Matt Wrack paid homage to Mike Miller and Jeff Wornham, firefighters from Stevenage fire station, Blue Watch who died in the Harrow Court fire, and the heroism they showed trying to save the life of a resident, Nathalie Close.

He said that following the inquest into their deaths, and discussions with the families, it was agreed that the “best tribute” to them was to ensure that the lessons of the tragedy were learned.

Matt Wrack was speaking to the FBU’s motion 54, “Fires in high-rise dwellings”, which called for fire services and other public authorities to work together with trade unions and tenants and residents groups to ensure:

- i) public awareness of the risks of using tea lights without appropriate holders;
- ii) firefighters are provided with adequate opportunities for familiarisation visits to all high-rise buildings;
- iii) firefighters are provided with suitable realistic training for incidents in such premises;

iv) systems to allow the rapid reporting of, and repair to, damaged dry rising mains;

v) hard-wired smoke alarm systems are provided wherever possible; and

vi) planning to ensure that adequate numbers of firefighters and fire engines are mobilized to fires in high-rise buildings.

Calling for a “joined-up” approach, Matt Wrack pointed out that people in poverty and on low-incomes were more likely to suffer from a fire and to die from a fire.

Touching on the Newquay fire, he also reminded delegates of the dangers of cuts to equipment and staffing as well as training – and made a plea to Cornwall County councillors to reconsider their plans to slash fire cover.

“Our motion is about the safety of fire crews safety and public safety. It’s about making people safe in their homes.”

Climate change, floods - and investment in equipment now

Tam McFarlane, FBU Executive Council member for the South West, praised the “magnificent” job performed by FBU members in the recent floods and called for investment in the appropriate equipment.

Speaking in support of motion 36 on climate change, he said: "The recent flooding that has hit the UK is a consequence of climate change. And our members who attended the floods did a magnificent job. But they were working up to 70 hours at a time, wading up to their waste in sewage water in kit designed to fight fires.

"The fire and rescue service doesn't have the equipment to deal with flooding on this scale. There needs to be investment in equipment now. We need action now to tackle the very serious consequences of climate change today."

Tam McFarlane also highlighted the plight of ordinary people whose homes have been flooded.

Affordable housing

The FBU swung behind calls for a campaign for more affordable housing. General Secretary Matt Wrack told delegates that public sector workers were increasingly priced out of the housing market, forcing firefighters, for example, to travel further and further to their place of work, a situation that had a particularly negative affect on the retained service.

The FBU amended motion 44 by Unison by calling for a moratorium to be implemented on further transfers or privatisations of public housing stock until public consultation on the Green Paper 'Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable' is completed.

Venezuela solidarity

FBU President Mick Shaw called for the UK to pursue a positive relationship with Venezuela and for trade unions here to cement relations with their corresponding organisations in the Latin American country.

In a speech supporting the FBU's motion 76 on Venezuela, Mick Shaw highlighted the advances for Venezuelan working people -

from free health and education and higher wages, to new rights for people in the workplace, women, and minority groups - and told of the democratic renewal in the country, as reported to FBU Annual Conference in May by our international guest, Ruben Linares of Venezuela's UNT trade union confederation.

Europe

The FBU backed calls for a referendum on the EU Treaty and for a No vote. In supporting motion 72 from the RMT, FBU President Mick Shaw said: "This is a neo-liberal, anti-democratic process. We want people to have a chance to vote and we want British people to vote no."


Delegates did not carry the RMT motion, supporting instead motion 71 from the GMB, which called for a referendum - without recommending whether to vote Yes or No - and expressed concerns that it would "promote unfettered privatisation throughout the EU." Both motions also expressed concerns about the threat to trade union rights.

Slavery commemoration

Trade unions need to do more to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade, said Michael Nicholas, Executive Council Member for FBU Black and Ethnic Minority Members.

Speaking to the motion to Congress from the Black Workers Conference - an FBU motion - Michael Nicholas said that "the descendents of the enslaved deserve An Annual Remembrance Day, a permanent monument commending the struggle for freedom and a process of reparation to atone for the enslavement and it's sad and negative consequences."

Michael Nicholas highlighted that a Remembrance Day proposal has widespread support but that there needs to be a campaign to bring that to fruition - next year. A space has been acquired in Hyde Park and



a permanent memorial has been commissioned. He called on the trade union movement to contribute towards the costs.

He added: "Reparation can take place in many forms - personal, societal and financial. Trade unions, the representatives of many descendents of the enslaved need to be at the forefront of these discussions. It's time to educate and inform our movement about the link between slavery and racism, between lost culture and the disengagement we see in some of our black youths, between self worth and lost history."

The motion called on the TUC General Council to encourage affiliates to undertake activities during 2007 to mark both the bicentenary and the achievements and positive contribution of black people and for the TUC to lobby government to review the inequalities in black British life and commit to: having a true and positive black history perspective reflected in the National Curriculum and in further/higher education; driving agenda for change within the public sector to address inequalities in service provision; and full implementation of the RRA Act to ensure that there are no barriers to black employment and progression in the public/private sector.

Matt Wrack re-elected to TUC General Council

Matt Wrack has been re-elected to section C of the TUC General Council, with 376,000 votes.

Among the other General Secretaries re-elected to this section - for unions of 100,000 members and less - was the National Union of Journalists' Jeremy Dear, Brian Caton from the Prison Officers Association and Judy McKnight from NAPO.

Sadly, Bob Crow, General Secretary of the RMT, was not re-elected.

All the FBU motions and amendments were carried. For more information on Congress 2007 visit: www.tuc.org.uk/congress

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