

NEW FIRE MINISTER MUST RETHINK ON CONTROL



**FBU General Secretary writes
to ODPM minister Phil Woolas**

FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack has written to new ODPM minister Phil Woolas calling for an urgent rethink. He is also writing to the chairs of English fire authorities urging them to give the new minister their private thoughts on the issue.

The move came as the fire service braced itself for a Government announcement on the FireControl project. The future of every emergency fire control room in England remained as precarious as the project itself.

Decisions over the future of controls in Scotland is likely to be heavily influenced by any decision taken in Whitehall. Wales has already said it is not interested in the regional control project.

The ODPM are preparing to treat the workforce with contempt, saying

staff will be given only an hours notice of where the new regional controls will be sited. But that decision is still no foregone conclusion with worries about cost and whether the proposed regional controls will work at all.

Fire authorities increasingly hostile

Fire authorities have been increasingly hostile in their approach to the project with many of them sharing the same reservations as the FBU. CFOA are sitting on the fence saying they support the project (but only if it works perfectly and makes all the promised savings).

Cuts to fire services have already been made in order for each Regional Management Board to find over £500,000 this year to pay for control project consultants. A lot of the behind the scenes project

work is also being funded by fire authorities.

The union has urged members to contact their local MPs asking them to make urgent representations to Government.

Conference calls for plan to be dropped

The union's annual conference in Southport said the Government should drop the plan saying it will lead to cuts in fire services, push up council tax and put lives in danger.

The conference passed an emergency resolution condemning the plans. The union said it would oppose the plans by all means possible including balloting for industrial action.

FBU President Ruth Winters said:

"The new ministers need to listen to the voices of the fire service telling them this plan must be dropped. It is opposed by the workforce and by large numbers of councillors and fire authorities.

Very expensive, may not work

"The Government's track record on large scale technology projects is very poor. Their record suggests this project will be very expensive and may not work at all.

"The project will lead to cuts in fire services and push up council tax to pay the £1 billion costs of these remote regional centres. It's

expensive, risky, and won't save a single life.

"Our ability to respond instantly to incidents could be badly damaged. It won't be benefits or tax credits being delayed, as happened after other Government technology failures, it will be a frontline 999 service.

"The new ministers must look again at the professional arguments put to them. If they press ahead we will look at our options and that will include industrial action."

New fire minister

The Government announced earlier this week that Phil Woolas, MP for Oldham East and Saddleworth, is the new Minister for Local Government and as part of his job he will take responsibility for the fire and rescue service.

Woolas reports to David Miliband, Minister for Local Government and Communities, and ultimately deputy prime minister John Prescott, who continues to preside over the ODPM.

Woolas is former President of the National Union of Students and head of communications at the GMB trade union. Involved in election campaigns in 1992 and 1997, he was also a BBC Newsnight producer and then producer at Channel 4 News.

Jimmy Fitzpatrick, former Executive Committee member of the FBU, is now a parliamentary secretary in the ODPM. He will support Woolas and Yvette Cooper MP, Minister for

Housing and Planning (ODPM) in the House of Commons.

Attacks on firefighters continue

Attacks on firefighters continue across the UK with two sickening incidents occurring in Northern Ireland over the past week.

On Monday 16 May, 20 youths ambushed a fire crew, setting fire to rubbish on Blacks Road, West Belfast.

One firefighter in attendance was hit on the back of the head with a large brick, suffering whiplash and head injuries. Firefighter colleagues at the scene took the injured firefighter to hospital in order to avoid subjecting ambulance workers to attacks from the youths.

The youths used mobile phones to video the attack.

FBU Executive Council member Jim Barbour told the BBC that the phone filming was "especially sickening".

"It's a new depth in the recreational violence that our firefighters are having to put up with," he said, adding that there was a "copycat" element to the increasing number of attacks on firefighters.

Government media campaign criticised

He blamed part of this on a government media campaign which had "backfired".

"We believe that the campaign was wholly wrongly constructed and has led to copycat attacks like the one last night," he said. "Our great concern is not just that the number of attacks is increasing, but the nature and the severity is also on the increase."

Petrol bombs

In a separate incident in Ballygomartin Road, Belfast, a fire was deliberately set and when firefighters arrived at the scene two petrol bombs were hurled at them.

Fortunately the bombs did not hit either the fire engine or firefighters but the attack could have ended in serious injuries or death.

Scotland moves to protect emergency workers

On 9 May the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act came into force in Scotland making it a criminal offence to assault, obstruct or hinder a person who is:

- Acting in the capacity of a police officer, fire officer or ambulance worker;
- Acting in the capacity of a prison officer; a member of the coastguard; a doctor; a member of a water rescue vessel; a nurse; a midwife; a social worker enforcing a child protection order or emergency protection authorisation; or a mental health officer who is

responding to emergency circumstances;

- Assisting someone acting in the capacity of any of the emergency workers listed in the Act, while they are responding to emergency circumstances.

Offences under the Act will attract a maximum penalty of 9 months in custody, a £5000 fine or both.

Whilst the Act itself only protects emergency workers, the Scottish Executive in partnership with the STUC is working to deal with the rising tide of verbal and physical assaults against workers facing the public through the implementation of a package of measures encouraging employers to take the problem seriously. Fife Brigade Secretary, Linda Shanahan is currently seconded to the Scottish Executive to work on this.

Clear message: abuse will not be tolerated

Commenting on the legislation Linda said: "Whilst there will always be criticisms of the application of legislation it is clear that with the advent of this Act a clear message has been sent out to those who seek to abuse firefighters and other emergency workers that their behaviour will no longer be tolerated. The publicity this has generated now means that no-one in Scotland can be under any illusion they will not be dealt with severely by the courts if they decide to abuse FBU members or other emergency staff at work."

A summary for a report commissioned by the FBU into attacks on firefighters is available on the FBU website (www.fbu.org.uk). The next issue of *Firefighter* magazine will carry more details of the issue.

Subscribe to the e-bulletin

To receive the e-bulletin, other FBU campaign news, information on Union services direct into your email inbox subscribe to our emailing list.

Go to www.fbu.org.uk, type in your email address and click on the "Sign Up" button. That's all it takes.