

# PENSIONS: UNIONS IN SHOW OF UNITY AT TUC



## **Unity pledge around co-ordinated action, including possible strikes, comes as FBU slams Government's proposals for the FPS**

The FBU and other unions at the TUC Congress agreed on Wednesday to oppose any imposition of an increase in retirement age in the public sector and called on the TUC General Council and Executive Committee to support and co-ordinate efforts to defend and improve public sector schemes, including through industrial action if necessary.

Delegates agreed that unions fully consult with each other before reaching agreement in order to counter any "divide and rule" tactics from the Government.

They also demanded that private employers be compelled to contribute into a pension for their

employees of at least 10% of pay while calling for a fairer state pension system free from means testing.

A national pensions demonstration was also backed by delegates as were the establishment of regional and local multi-union campaign groups in alliance with trades councils, the National Pensions Convention and other relevant organisations.

The move followed a packed fringe meeting organised by PCS civil service union on Tuesday evening, where the leaders of all the unions representing public sector workers talked about the need for unity in action to protect public sector pensions.

Speaking at that meeting, FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack sharply criticised the proposed changes to the FPS and a new worse pensions scheme for new entrants

unveiled in recent days by the Government.

"The Government want to blame public sector workers for the so-called pensions crisis."

"In 1948 when the Firefighters Pension Scheme was established, firefighters tended to retire and then die very young. As a result of the FBU's hard work in improving the health and safety of FBU members, firefighters are now retiring in better health. And I make no apologies for that.

Matt went on to criticise Chancellor Gordon Brown who had made his key note speech to Congress earlier in the day.

### Two-tier pensions slammed

"We have heard Gordon Brown set out his opposition to a two-tier workforce. Well what about two-tier pensions? How can it be right that two members who tragically die in the same incident and then their survivors get treated differently because one is on an inferior pension scheme."

Criticising Government claims that the pensions of firefighters and other public sector workers are no longer unaffordable at a time when £5 billion of public money has been spent on an illegal occupation of Iraq, Matt said: "If you can spend on warfare, you can spend on welfare."

Matt saluted the determination to maintain the unity established since the launch of the TUC-

coordinated public sector pensions campaign in autumn last year.

But he sounded a note of caution about the prospects of a positive outcome to negotiations with the ODPM that started this week in the wake of the unveiling of details of proposed changes to the FPS and a new pensions scheme for new entrants to the fire service.

"I fear that the Government is not serious about negotiations and is intent on imposing changes to the pensions of FBU members and others in the public sector.

"We have to talk about and prepare for industrial action," he said, echoing the sentiments of other trade union leaders.

### **TUC - Public service heroes hailed**

The TUC paid tribute on Tuesday to its members from public services who saved lives, counselled the bereaved and organised rescue efforts in the wake of the London bombings this summer.

Eleven workers from seven unions, including FBU firefighter members Dave Moore, Battersea Red Watch, and Richie Hillier, Kensington Blue Watch. Both attended Edgware Road on July 7.

Responding to a statement by Congress on the bombings, President Ruth Winters took the opportunity to hit out at Chancellor Gordon Brown who had praised emergency workers during his keynote address earlier in the day.

## FBU accuses Government of hypocrisy

She accused the Government of blatant hypocrisy and pointed to major fire service cuts in London and Birmingham. "We would exchange all the pats on the back we get from politicians if they would listen to what we were saying.

"We met the Fire Minister in the days following the bombings and he thanked our members for their wonderful response. Then he said he was pressing ahead with plans which would see hundreds of emergency fire control operators lose their jobs.

"We should send a simple message: keep your platitudes and change your attitudes," she told Congress.

## **TUC - delegates back FBU campaign for national emergency response standard**

TUC Congress has swung behind the FBU in demanding that the Government work with all stakeholders to reintroduce national emergency response standards for the fire and rescue service.

This national standard must set both maximum response times and minimum resources requirements.

Presenting the motion before delegates on Thursday, FBU General Secretary Matt Wrack said the UK fire and rescue service was a highly successful public service,

pointing to new figures showing that 3,868 people were rescued from serious home fires in England in 2003, a rise of 42% over a decade, and that nine out of ten are being rescued alive.

He pointed out that these figures do not include those escaping without the aid of the fire service or those rescued by neighbours or passers-by.

Nor do they include the numbers not at immediate risk who are evacuated.

"We need to stop this success from being undermined by a campaign of cuts to frontline fire services led by fire authorities across the country," Matt Wrack said.

Matt slammed chief fire officers deliberately underplaying the rescue role of the fire service and making decisions based on facts rather than widely held myths, in order to justify these cuts.

And he said that FBU members - firefighters and emergency fire control staff - know only too well that the emergency response time is a critical factor when they are trying to save lives or protect property.

"We need to defend the successes of the fire service and prevent it becoming a post code lottery.

"This is best done by national standards of emergency response

"At stake are the lives of millions of members that you represent - and

their families. I hope you can join us in our campaign."

## **TUC - delegates support control campaign**

The Government's madcap plans to regionalise emergency fire control were brought to the attention of fellow trade unionists at a fringe meeting called by the FBU on Tuesday.

FBU member Sharon Eames, who has worked for 11 years in Hampshire control, told the meeting: "We outperform our own best performance indicators. We're a very cost efficient and immediate service. If they close our control and replace it with a regional control with fewer staff, its going to take longer to answer a call. That could cost lives."

In calling on the support of fellow trade unionists, General Secretary Matt Wrack said: "Consequences of failure in a service which rescues thousands of people every year - and relies on rapid real time information from controls to do so - would be catastrophic and very public. It is time the Government stopped ignoring widespread and growing concerns about this controversial project. It is time they saw sense."

Guest speaker Jean Geldart, representing local government workers in Unison, criticised what she saw as an attempt by the Government to privatise whole areas of the public sector, arguing that a first step can be the creation of artificial barriers between so-called backroom and frontline staff and the parallel introduction of

new technology. This ignores the fact that critical skills that are lost in the process, undermining the quality of the service.

"Turn it into a call centre and before you know it, they'll be saying how it could be run more efficiently by the private sector.

"Another day, another whizzo idea. A quick headline, a quick buzz. The Government want to be seen to be doing something about the public services. But of course, they do nothing of the sort."

The chair of the meeting was Val Salmon, Executive Council member for control staff.


## **TUC - FBU joins other unions in call for trade union freedom bill**

The FBU joined other trade unions on Tuesday in backing an emergency motion for a trade union freedom private members' bill.

The motion was proposed by the Gate Gourmet workers' TGWU union, and seconded by the RMT, and the bill would give protection for workers starting from their first day at work and cut the amount of notice required for a strike ballot.

The motion follows growing union restlessness at the slow pace of change following the Warwick agreement, a deal struck last summer between the government and the unions over Labour policy and trade union law.

Hopes for a public bill to wrap up many of the points thrashed out



last year have not materialised. Unions are now calling for a "Warwick Two" to focus on better protection for workers' interests in the climate of deregulation.

The private members bill, drawn up by Hayes and Harlington MP John McDonnell in conjunction with the Institute of Employment Rights, sets out demands for minimum terms and conditions in each sector of industry, simplifying the complex procedures surrounding workplace ballots, and suspending workers' contracts of employment during lawful industrial disputes.

Mr McDonnell, a strong trade unionist who sits on a number of trade union parliamentary groups, including that of the FBU, warned that continued failure to relax current restrictions on trade union activity would lead to a further decline in union membership.

"If we can't sort this one out there is a message going out to the whole of the movement about the future", he said. "It is what are we going to offer [members] in the future."

Unions have now pinned their hopes for the private member's bill, which they want to see included in next year's Queen Speech.

### Unions must apply pressure

Mr McDonnell said he expected strong resistance to the bill in both houses, and called on the unions themselves to apply pressure.

Professor Keith Ewing, president of the Institute of Employment Rights, condemned the government's failure to introduce a bill implementing the deal struck at Warwick last summer. He drew a contrast with the last piece of employment legislation, Fairness at Work, a manifesto commitment which led to a white paper one year after New Labour first came to power, he said. "There has been no public movement on Warwick and there is frustration as a result", he said.

Brendan Barber, the TUC general-secretary, said the repeal of the Conservatives' anti-union laws should be part of a "fundamental change" of direction by Labour if it was to retain working-class support in Tony Blair's third term.

"In the second term we had important achievements but a foreign policy that deeply divided the country," he said.

"Huge investment in public services but tempered often by a preference for private sector solutions. We won important new rights at work but heard too much sniping at social Europe. This time we need a fundamental change of direction with a clear vision for the workplace at its heart."

Tony Woodley, the leader of the Transport and General Workers Union, argued that union members should be able to take supportive action to support colleagues involved directly in a dispute.

"If solidarity is a crime then send us all to jail. Our movement was

built on solidarity," he told delegates.

## **Northumberland members ramp up closures campaign**

Members and officials in Northumberland are ramping up their campaign to stop the closure of Ashington, Blyth and Morpeth Fire Stations and the removal of a fire engine from Cramlington.

They are launching a major drive to collect signatures for a petition against the chief fire officer's plans for the closures and the building of only two replacement fire stations at Pegswood and East Sleekburn.

### Proposals put lives at risk

"Such a proposal would lead to increased response times to reach the vast majority of people in South East Northumberland. This would put lives at risk," says Colin James, FBU Northumberland brigade chair.

"Experienced firefighters believe that the current locations of fire stations are better placed to serve the community.

"The chief officer's plan means there would be a loss of 28 full time Firefighters (a 20% cut) in South East Northumberland, to help pay for the new out of town fire stations."

This would mean less full time firefighters to carry out necessary community fire safety work and be

available to respond to emergencies.

"Contrary to what the chief officer has stated, rapid response times to an emergency are important and are proven to save lives," says Colin.

"The chief officer is proposing a reduced service funded by expensive borrowing. Firefighters believe there are better and cheaper options."

## **Union raises safety fears over the mismanagement of the West Mids fire service**

The Union has again expressed its deep concern over public and Firefighter safety because of the badly managed introduction of the untested and untried new shift system.

At one point during the weekend the fire service could only provide one third of its normal firefighting capability as only 20 fire engines were available to fight fires in the West Midlands.

The undertakings made in the risk management plan have already been broken by poor management of a controversial shift system which removes 13 appliances at night.

The debacle left large areas of the West Midlands without any fire cover.

### Reports of members forced into crews of 4, against 5 in plans

The union has received reports of management forcing members to staff appliances with a crew of four

rather than five as stated in their plans, in order to keep fire engines on call, and in some cases have used the threat of discipline to achieve this.

"We believe this action compromises the Health and Safety of firefighters which in turn affects public safety," says brigade secretary Peter Gallagher.

"We demand that the fire authority urgently reviews the fire cover within the West Midlands area, because if the weekend's events continue we have serious concerns regarding the safety of the public and our members alike."

## **Suffolk talks continue**

FBU officials are continuing detailed negotiations with Suffolk fire and rescue service employers in a bid to find the basis of a potential settlement.

"The spirit of both parties in the talks is to maintain and improve the emergency response of the Service and community fire safety," says Keith Handscomb, Executive Council member for East Anglia (Region 9).

Suffolk FBU brigade committee took the decision to continue negotiations after considering a report on 10 hours of exploratory talks held on Saturday 10 September.

### Strikes already announced will go ahead

No strikes already announced will be suspended since it was agreed to

stick by an existing policy that this would not happen merely to facilitate talks.

So yesterday's strike went ahead and so will today's, plus the four strikes already announced for October. However, the brigade committee deferred the decision to request any additional strikes to the next meeting.

The brigade committee have allowed a 14 day window of opportunity for the talks by setting a deadline of Thursday 29 September for the talks to conclude and a final report to be given to their brigade committee meeting on Friday 30 September - two clear days before the first October strike on Monday 3 October.


### Progress of talks to be reviewed by Union 21 September

The brigade committee meets next week on 21 September to review progress of the talks and shall reconsider the question of additional strikes depending on the progress report they receive.

"It is important to stress that the dispute continues; there is no proposed settlement or offer actually on the table," says Keith.

"But there is a window of opportunity for both sides to bottom-out issues discussed to see if there is any realistic chance of a negotiated settlement prior to both sides moving in to the next phase of the dispute."

### Contribute to the hardship fund!



Members elsewhere in the UK are urged to do all they can to support our brothers and sisters in Suffolk.

Details of the Suffolk Hardship Fund are:

Lloyds Bank  
Sort code 30-94-55  
Account Number 4418949

Cheques should be made payable to The Suffolk Hardship Fund, and sent to our Hardship Fund co-ordinator:

Kevin Block, 17 Kirby Street,  
Ipswich, Suffolk, IP4 4PZ

Officials are encouraged to do the collections, but cheques from individuals are also welcome.

Messages/resolutions of support for Suffolk members can be emailed to Suffolk brigade chair, Vince Jell, [vinceatthejells@hotmail.com](mailto:vinceatthejells@hotmail.com)

Suffolk fire crews voted two to one in favour of strike action in a ballot over planned cuts to frontline emergency response firefighter posts.

The Union says the cuts by the fire authority will endanger firefighters and the public for years to come.

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