

Friday Jan. 27 2006 No.83

PENSIONS: LET'S MAKE OUR VOICE HEARD!



**Attend your branch meeting.
Mandate your delegate for
recall conference. And lobby
your MP.**

The Union is planning a conference on February 16 in Southport, as part of the campaign for industrial action the FBU intend to take in the face of planned detrimental changes to all FBU members' pensions. The FBU Executive Council has recommended a ballot for strike action over the issue.

Your pension is your pay when you retire. So any attempt to cut or delay that pay should be treated like a pay cut.

The Government promised to negotiate and not dictate changes to fire service pensions. They have not done so. The union has been told that Ministers have taken key decisions which are NOT up for negotiation.

The Union wants you to back calls for industrial action.

An Executive Council Emergency

Resolution to be put to the Recall Conference next month has been sent to all branches.

Attend your branch meeting, discuss and vote on the Executive Council resolution.

DON'T LET YOUR FUTURE SLIP THROUGH YOUR FINGERS

Lobby Your MP

The Government proposals affect ALL members - wholetime, retained, officers, firefighters (control).

Let your MP know how angry you are about the detrimental proposals. Go to the FBU website www.fbu.org.uk and follow the Lobby Your MP link.

There you'll find letters on the Firefighter's Pension Scheme, the Local Government Pension Scheme and on retained pension rights. It takes 2 minutes to fire off a letter to your national political

representative. Make sure they know how you feel!

For more information on what the changes mean for you, visit www.fbu.org.uk/campaigns/pensions

Private sector occupational pensions – what crisis?

Employers are continuing to shut down decent occupational pensions to new entrants with major employers like Rentokil proposing to close its final salary scheme outright. The upshot is only one in four private sector workers are now members of a defined benefit scheme.

To make matters worse, the attack on workers' pensions comes at a time when top bosses are guaranteeing their own bumper schemes.

The facts are these:

UK companies owe their pension funds at least £20 billion in back contributions they elected not to make in the fat years. That's the same amount, by the way, that the UK's 50 biggest companies avoided paying in tax over the past five years, according to campaign group Tax Justice.

And what happened to all that money? It has lined the pockets of shareholders and company executives. The FTSE top 100 companies paid out just shy of £40 billion in dividends in 2004 alone! Meanwhile pensions for executives at some of the UK's largest companies stand between £500,000 and £1 million a year.

The crisis is of this and previous Governments' making and it is up to the Government of the day to sort it out.

Some observers say that for starters the Government should put a limit on dividends as a ratio of pension deficits or indeed mandate a dividend holiday. And tax breaks could favour companies that shame the herd by refusing to close schemes down.

www.tuc.org.uk, www.taxjustice.net, www.observer.co.uk

Union launches alternative to regional controls

The Union has unveiled to MPs its alternative strategy to the Government's high-risk, massively expensive and unpopular plan to close existing local fire control rooms and open new remote controls in England.

At a well attended meeting in the House of Commons on Wednesday, General Secretary Matt Wrack outlined the FBU's proposals to maintain the existing network of local fire controls and to re-designate a number of existing brigade Fire Control Centres as 'Resilience Controls (ResCons)'.

One ResCon would be designated for each of the 9 Regional Management Board areas in England, plus one ResCon for Wales, one ResCon for Scotland and one ResCon for Northern Ireland.

UK-wide network of Rescons

The UK-wide network of ResCons would also be responsible for emergency mobilisation and support of brigade function for the brigade in which they are situated, Matt explained.

ResCons throughout the UK would be connected to each other to provide for UK-wide coordination and UK-wide resilience in the event of one or more ResCons becoming unavailable.

ResCons would be responsible for coordinating the required regional or national response for or from the area of the UK that they cover in line with Regional or UK-wide response plans.

Existing brigade fire controls continue emergency mobilisations

Fire Control Centres within brigades would actually carry out the emergency mobilisations.

Said Matt: "We know the Resilience Controls I have outlined don't suit the needs of the Government's regionalisation policy."

"So much about the ODPM's £2 billion FiReControl project smacks of that agenda which is being pursued - but not yet delivered - for the police service and those ambulance services which are not yet regionalised.

Rescons suit all the requirements of the fire service

"But we believe the Resilience Controls I have outlined suit all

of the requirements of the fire & rescue service."

The parliamentary event was chaired by Labour MP Michael Clapham, who is co-chair of the All Party Fire Safety Group. After the speeches MPs were briefed in more detail by FBU national officials and Executive Council members.

The Union's alternative strategy is explained in detail in *Regional Control: National Resilience*. This document will be available early next week on www.controlcare.org.uk A hard copy is going out to all branches and has already been sent to MPs, chief fire officers and fire authority chairs. It will also be sent to representatives in the devolved parliaments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

MPs call on minister to intervene over Northumberland cuts

MPs laid into Northumberland fire chief Brian Helser's plans to make cuts to fire cover and called on fire minister Jim Fitzpatrick to intervene on this "life and death" issue for the local community.

During an adjournment debate in the House of Commons on Wednesday, secured by Blyth Labour MP Ronnie Campbell, Mr Hesler and the fire authority also came under attack for a "lack of consultation with the trade union and the general public."

Matter of life and death

Mr Campbell asked the minister to consider calling a halt to plans

that include closures of existing stations in the south-east of the county and the construction of two new remote PFI-financed stations, and to take heed of the serious concerns over longer emergency response times raised by the 25,000 local people who have signed a petition: "This is a matter of life and death, yet Northumberland county council is running headlong into this issue."

Serious risks

John McDonnell, secretary of the FBU parliamentary group, said that evidence presented by Ronnie Campbell and other local MPs showed that "serious risks could be caused by the decision to invest significantly in establishing stations that might well be white elephants and certainly will not perform effectively and with public support in the same way as the existing stations."

Minister Fitzpatrick expressed a "hope that there will be an opportunity for everyone to sit round the table to talk through the issues." But he stood full square behind the fire authority, saying he was "confident from the evidence that we have seen, which has been presented to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister by a research unit, that this work has been quality assured...that it will provide better protection for the people in Northumberland."

Herts fire chief misleads fire authority and public

Hertfordshire chief fire officer Roy Wilshire has provided written

answers to questions put to him by the Fire and Rescue Safety Plan Topic Group, which directly contrast with information he has provided to the public and his own firefighters.

The County Council Topic Group asked the Chief to respond to evidence provided by the local FBU which challenged the "new" 10 and 13 minute attendance standards. Chief Fire Officer, Roy Wilshire stated: "Measurement of attendance time has always been and will continue to be from the time the station was alerted."

However, the Draft Community Safety Plan, including the Fact Sheets for Royston, Radlett, Bovingdon and Watford clearly state that the 10 and 13 minute attendance standard "include call handling and turnout time" (www.hertsdirect.org/fire).

The chief fire officer needs to make his mind up: either the proposed new attendance time of 10 minutes for the first fire engine includes 3-5 minutes call handling and turnout time as stated in the Draft Document, or as he now states, "from the time the station was alerted". It can't be both!

Too long to wait

The FBU contends that even the 10 and 13 minute attendance times are too long for members of the public to wait for fire engines to arrive from the time they make their emergency call - in our line of work, seconds and minutes are the difference between life and death!

If the chief fire officer's latest answer is true then in reality the "new" attendance times he proposes for the arrival of fire engines in an emergency will be nearer 15 and 18 minutes, rather than the 10 and 13 minutes he has put out for public consultation.

At the same meeting, held at County Hall on the 24 January 2006, the chief fire officer was forced to provide evidence that clearly showed more emergency calls and more property fires on Watford Station Ground during the night shift than during the day. Watford faces a reduction in night time fire cover under the proposed Community Safety Plan.

FBU applauds Norfolk councillors' support

It has been confirmed that the Union's campaign against the proposed cuts to retained firefighters and fire engines in Norfolk has proved successful. At the meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee between the FBU and Norfolk Fire Authority on Tuesday 24 January, councillors confirmed that the Norfolk County Council Fire & Community Protection Review panel will not support any reduction in front line fire cover.

As a consequence of the insufficient grant from central government and the budget shortfall faced by Norfolk County Council, the Norfolk chief fire officer had drafted a range of cuts options including the removal of four retained fire crews and fire engines protecting the County.

Defending retained members

The Union immediately mounted a high-profile campaign to defend the jobs of their members working the retained duty system, save the vital frontline fire engines and highlighting the importance of front line emergency cover.

Neil Day, FBU brigade secretary said: "We pay tribute to our retained and wholetime FBU members for uniting behind the campaign to defend the Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service and we thank the public for the support they continue to give us. And we applaud the councillors for recognizing that cutting the fire service any more would be a step too far."

Real achievement

"This is an example of what can be achieved when a committed trade union such as the FBU acts in the best interests of its members, the public and the fire service. By reacting quickly and professionally, on this occasion we have also been able to attract the political support of our elected councillors. However, we all must be ready to act decisively again if future budgetary savings target cuts in our frontline emergency service."

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