

PENSIONS : MEMBERS CONSIDER FRESH PROPOSALS



**All branches to meet to
discuss the latest situation
- Recall conference to
follow**

Fresh Government proposals for fire service pensions have been put out to detailed consultation with members. They were received just before the start of the union's recall conference last Thursday and followed a series of special meetings between the Office and the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and the FBU between 7th and 14th February.

The recall conference decided that the proposals go out for consultation and supported a Northern Ireland resolution that this would be followed by a further recall conference. Many delegates stated that concerns remained about ill-health retirement.

Fire Minister Jim Fitzpatrick wrote to General Secretary Matt Wrack to "set out the basis on which we see matters being taken forward on each of the main issues." (Story continued overleaf...)

Following circulation of an earlier version of this bulletin a number of members contacted us about the content of the main article on pensions. We thank those members who have raised these concerns and accept that the article may not have fully reflected the debate at the recall conference, in particular the fact that the Executive Council resolution was defeated.

General Secretary Matt Wrack said, " I gave a commitment to the Recall Conference that there would be no 'spin' from Head Office around these proposals and I stand by that. I thank those members who have raised concerns. Nobody in the union likes the proposals from the ODPM and all we ask is that members consider carefully the facts in front of them and the options that now face us."

Proposal to up retirement age to 55 withdrawn

In it, he withdrew the proposal to increase the minimum retirement age to 55. But he outlined the Government's position that the proposals on ill-health retirements, due to come in on 1 April, will go ahead.

He said the proposals on the injury scheme were part of a wider public sector review and would be published later this Spring and subject to consultation. Until any new scheme comes in, the existing injury and compensation arrangements will continue to operate.

Current firefighters working the retained duty system (RDS) would maintain their link with wholetime pay for ill-health and injury pension purposes. This became a key FBU concern when it emerged that the ODPM intended to break the link and base future ill-health and injury payments on much lower "core" RDS earnings.

Firefighters working the RDS will have access to the New Firefighters Pension Scheme (NFPS), securing a pension for the first time. The Government hopes its lower contribution rate of 8.5% will also tempt people to quit the current scheme.

The ODPM would not move on the NFPS retirement age of 60. This was despite clear warnings from the FBU and employers that this will lead to a spate of ill-health and injury pensions as older firefighters succumb to the physical demands of the job.

Officers' flexi duty allowance and other pensionable allowances such as London Weighting will continue to be pensionable under the current scheme and the NFPS.

Control staff and RDS

The union's claim for emergency fire control staff to have access to the NFPS will start to be considered by a working group within a month. The Government had no objections in principle, but it said it would have to consider any extra costs.

The FBU also had concerns over the transitional period between the existing FPS being withdrawn for new entrants and the New FPS being put in place. New entrants after 1 April will be placed in the existing FPS until the New FPS is put in place. If they are killed or injured, benefits would be paid under the FPS until the transfer to the New FPS.

The Executive Council withdrew its recommendation for a strike ballot. General Secretary Matt Wrack told the conference no-one thought the proposals were a great victory, although it was obvious there had been movement.

"No one feels this is any great victory," he said. "The attack on ill-health pensions has not stopped, but we have movement on the retirement age for members of the existing scheme.

"We have secured protection for firefighters working the retained duty system who could have lost out significantly if they were injured on duty. But we could not persuade them to move on the retirement age in the new scheme which, at 60, is ludicrous.

"We are moving into talks on emergency fire control staff having access to the new FPS. We have also seen off the moves which threatened the status of certain allowances. We have ensured that currently pensionable allowances (e.g. Flexi Duty Allowances and London Weighting) will remain pensionable.

"There has been some movement and we are not where we were six weeks ago before our campaign stepped up a gear.

"There are several key areas over which we will go on campaigning and pressing our case. The important thing now is that members get a chance to see the proposals, consider them and tell us their views.

"If members say they are not acceptable and that strike action is necessary then we would start the balloting process very quickly. Conference has recommended that a ballot does not take place but it is rightly the members who will decide."

Fresh proposals - key points

- Proposal to increase the minimum pension age to 55 has been withdrawn. Retirement at

60 in the new scheme for new entrants remains and the FBU will continue to campaign for change.

- Firefighters working the retained duty system will be able to join the new pension scheme, gaining a pension for the first time. The union is awaiting the decision of the House of Lords in a bid to get RDS firefighters access to the existing FPS.
- The threat that serving RDS firefighters who joined the new scheme would lose the existing link to wholetime earnings for ill-health and injury purposes has been withdrawn.
- The proposals for a new injury scheme have not been published and any changes will follow consultation. Until then, the current scheme will remain in place.
- The Government would not budge on changes which will make it more difficult to secure an ill-health pension.
- Talks will start within a month on allowing emergency fire control staff access to the new FPS. The government is not opposed in principle to the move, but has concerns about possible extra costs.
- All currently pensionable allowances such as Flexi Duty allowance and London Weighting will continue to be pensionable under both the existing FPS and the new FPS.