

Your Vote, Your Voice

IN the last edition of *Firefighter* I made a plea not to let apathy elect the officials who will lead the union in the future and whose election will impact on the future of the fire service. Well, it did.

The turnout for the recent election for assistant general secretary was a disappointment. The winning candidate, Matt Wrack, secured the votes of around 11% of the membership. The runner up, John McGhee secured 10% of those votes, with Dean Mills securing 4%. Whilst congratulating Matt on his election I am sure that he shares my concern, as I am sure will John and Dean, at the turnout.

The nomination stage of the election of general secretary has now started and any ballot will be held in April. It is being argued by the supporters of one candidate that this election is a referendum on the handling of the pay dispute and in particular their view that the strikes should have continued.

I think this election is about the future and the type of leadership that can take our union and our service forward and in doing so best serve the interests of our members. Why do I not believe this election is a referendum on the pay dispute?

Quite simply, throughout the dispute and at every crucial stage, democratic decisions were made by our membership in full accordance with the union's rules. The truth is, some refused to accept those democratic decisions and sought to undermine them.

Let us remind ourselves of some of those key events:

- Unanimous decision of annual conference to endorse the pay claim;
- Unanimous decision of conference to ballot for industrial action in response to the employers' offer;
- Massive yes vote of the membership to undertake strike action in a high turnout ballot;
- Overwhelming vote to accept the June 2003 Agreement;
- Overwhelming vote in a consultative ballot of the membership to accept the outcome of the detailed negotiations on implementing the June Agreement;
- Unanimous decision of the executive council, after full consultation with



Whatever you do,
vote in the election for
the general secretary
of our union, says
Mike Fordham

the membership, to endorse in August 2004 the new grey book and the full implementation of the pay rises due at stages 2 and 3 of the agreement, thus bringing the dispute to an end.

Some now wish to argue that the attacks on pensions, jobs, fire cover and conditions of service are solely as a result of the handling by the leadership of the dispute. How naïve. Where have they been for the last 25 years?

I know where I have been and others within the same leadership they attack. They have been defending our members and our service from the worst excesses of those attacks and at the same time doing our best to take our service progressively forward.

The pension review started in the early 90s. Jobs have been lost in London and elsewhere, consistently over the last 20 years and, yes, there have been reductions in fire cover as a consequence. Conditions of service have been under attack from employers at a local and national level as far as our history goes back.

The government tried to abandon the old pay formula when the first payment was due back in the late 70s. In 1993 they tried to end it altogether. The current pensions attack is across the public sector and beyond.

To suggest this is new and as a result of the leadership's alleged mishandling of the dispute is both dishonest and opportunist. So what is this election about in my view?

It is not about the past. It is about the future.

It is about electing a general secretary who can take the union forward. It is about electing a general secretary who will ensure the union will stay strong, united and influential in the determining the future of our service and the conditions of service of our members within it. And it is your decision.

The union's rules do not allow me to canvass for nominations or votes on behalf of a candidate by letter, circular or any other written communication. I do, though, believe I have a right and a duty to inform the membership of my views in respect of the future of my union. I also believe that members expect me to have a view and to express it.