

In December 2004 the Union made a commitment to expel any member who was found to be a member of the BNP or any other far-right organisation and challenged the service to make the same commitment. A year down the line Firefighter assesses the progress



GERRY MCCANN/REPORT/DIGITAL.CO.UK

THE UNION has a long and proud tradition of campaigning against racism and fascism – from Oswald Mosely’s nazi blackshirts in the 1930-1940s to the National Front in the 1970s and more recently a range of far-right groups, including the British National Party (BNP). Last year a major campaign kicked off after the Union discovered that an employee of Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, a member of the BNP, was standing as a candidate in the June 2004 European elections representing the far-right political party and using his position as a retained firefighter to encourage people to vote for him.

The local community, the FBU and its black and ethnic minority members (B&EMM) were outraged and concerns were immediately raised with the fire authority. Local residents of Brokenhurst village, where the employee lived, were shocked to learn that they had a member of the BNP among them.

Lud Ramsey, chair of FBU Hampshire and B&EMM rep region 12, was involved in the campaign from the start. “The Union was notified by a member of the public that a Hampshire firefighter was standing for the BNP,” he says. “I contacted her immediately. She was livid. She wanted to organise a demonstration in her village.

“I was personally very angry that we had people like this in the service. Out of a workforce of 2,000 we had just three ethnic minority members on the payroll and the brigade was committed to ensure the service better reflected the community it served. It was bad enough that he was a member of the BNP, let alone standing in an election for them.

“We immediately raised the issue with the brigade management who argued there was nothing that could be done because the BNP was a legal party. So we went down to the village with a petition and gave out leaflets. We got 200 signatures in two hours. In the short time I spent in the village I couldn’t believe the strength of feeling.

“Because the employee was near retirement, the brigade hoped the issue would go away. We weren’t about to let that happen.”

Yet, by October 2004, efforts to get the fire authority to take a principled position on the issue were getting nowhere. (Hampshire fire service eventually took the BNP

member off the run when he stood again, this time in the general election, although he remained an employee until he retired.)

The FBU’s campaign

The Union launched a campaign to highlight the anomaly of a community fire and rescue service with a racist, sexist and homophobic as a service deliverer. The FBU’s southern region EC member Dean Mills was a key activist. “We asked if the fire authority could deal with him under the discipline code, if appropriate,” he says. “He argued he had the freedom to express his own views. But what he’d done was use the fire service uniform to promote himself. We felt that meant that, by being part of the same fire service, we were endorsing the BNP.”

Every member of the FBU’s B&EMM national committee wrote personally to the chief fire officer of Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, along with FBU officials from brigades including West Midlands and

FBU says No to racism

Grampian and the National Women's Committee. But they hit a brick wall.

So the B&EMM National Committee moved the campaign up a level and decided to lobby every fire authority chair and chief fire officer, including the then Chief Fire Officers' Association (CFOA) President, Alan Doig. They wanted to find out what their position was on members of far-right organisations or extremist groups in their fire and rescue services. Finally the committee wrote to the Commission for Racial Equality to request their assistance. The FBU's solicitors Thompsons also assisted in this work.

Responses from the 'Time for a Response' questionnaire were received from just 28 out of 58 fire and rescue authorities (see box). One response from the Chair of Wiltshire Fire Authority was particularly insulting. He said: 'I have no intention whatsoever of reacting to 'Time for a Response' from you or from anyone else'. Well thanks Mr Wilmott (CBE, QFSM).

Many of the brigades were seeking legal advice and, when it was forthcoming, their answer was generally:

"The policies of the BNP are not acceptable to many of the population but they are a legally recognised political party with a legal manifesto. As such current case law prevents organisations taking action against individuals on the grounds of their legally held political beliefs' (Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue).

Another frequent response received by the Union was: "We are awaiting guidance from CFOA on this issue."

So why are brigades so reluctant to take a stand on this issue? After all, the Fire Service Practitioners Forum, including representatives from government, fire authorities and brigade management agreed when the Union launched its national campaign a year ago that membership of the BNP and other similar organisations was not compatible with membership of the UK fire and rescue service.

"Although almost all of the letters stated a commitment to the promotion of good race relations in their service, most are still not prepared to do the right thing," says Sam Samuels, an operational firefighter and chair of B&EMM.

Determined to pursue the campaign, the B&EMM committee asked the CFOA to work with them on the issue. "We felt that their influence would be invaluable, given the responses received from a number of fire and rescue services. We also asked the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to take this issue on board with a view to getting a national policy similar to that of the police and the prison service – of zero tolerance," says Sam.

So what is the progress to date?

In September, CFOA director for Equality and Diversity Douglas Mackay briefed the FBU B&EMM committee on how the issue had been progressed. The Union learned that after discussions with the CFOA, Mackay took a paper to the Diversity Happens! programme board, a fire service forum, in March 2005, seeking a ministerial view and guidance on this matter. The paper was accepted by the meeting and it was subsequently decided that civil servants would prepare a policy paper for ministerial decision. The Union undertands that the minister, Phil Woolas, is now in possession of that policy paper.

The B&EMM committee will also submit a paper to the minister to ensure that the Union's legitimate concerns are raised.



'There is no place for racism in football and that is the message that needs to go out to all supporters from all clubs'

**Steve Cotterill
Burnley FC
Manager**

When the committee wrote to the CFOA in October they were told that the association would: "Encourage Government to take an interest in this matter as, if it is deemed inappropriate for a BNP member to be a Police Officer, then many if not all of the same arguments would apply to being a member of the fire and rescue service."

Back in the brigades, progress has been very slow. Just two have come out with positive statements – Avon and Gloucestershire. The latter's says:

"Not only are discriminatory acts illegal, they go against the core values we as a fire and rescue service hold dear. Racial harassment and incitement to such acts goes beyond the acceptable parameters of behaviour within Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service and will not be tolerated. Any member of staff who displays such behaviour through membership of any organisation whose constitution, aims, objectives, pronouncements or ideology contradict this duty to promote racial equality will be subject to formal disciplinary investigation, which may result in dismissal. This specifically includes membership of the British National Party (BNP)."

This statement shows a level of commitment from Gloucestershire Fire Authority and, although it remains untested to date, it is head and shoulders above the position of others, who refuse to even discuss the issue. The CFO of Avon issued a very similar statement showing that there are senior managers willing to publicly make a stance against racism. But not all authorities are sympathetic.

What about the others?

Dorset chief fire officer Martin Chapman put a proposal to the fire authority recommending that it adopt a policy of zero tolerance of BNP members in the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service.

He told the authority that:

- Failing to address the issue of staff being members of extreme groups such as the BNP would be in conflict with the duty of the authority under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.
- The right to be a member of the BNP must be restricted in order to protect the rights and freedoms of minority ethnic groups.
- His statement was lawful and compatible with the appropriate European convention.
- It was vital for the fire authority to engage with this issue in order to progress equality and diversity within the service.

But the fire authority rejected the chief officer's recommendation and refused to back the statement. It is understood by the FBU that the CFO was subjected to threatening phone calls prior to the meeting. The proposal would have made it abundantly clear that there is no place for bigots and racists in the fire and rescue service in Dorset. Instead, this decision was a coup for the BNP. The party's Bournemouth branch was quoted as being "delighted with the decision".

John Drake, regional official for the FBU in the South West said: "Dorset Fire Authority have not only missed a golden opportunity to come to a principled and morally correct decision they have also been bullied by the jackboots of the BNP. BNP members have a history of expressing their views with the firebomb through the letterbox, the nail bomb and the boot. They have promoted racially motivated thuggery, not political debate."

FBU Regional Secretary Tam McFarlane said that incidents of racism in the South West were growing at an alarming rate. "Our region has been targeted by groups such as the BNP who exploit and inflame tensions between racial groups and communities by injecting hatred and abuse into political campaigns.

"During the recent industrial action," he said, "reports were received of BNP and National Front activists turning up on fire station picket lines in the South West in an attempt to distribute racist literature and exploit our dispute to their own ends. They have always stated their hatred of all Unions and were immediately expelled from FBU picket lines by our members and officials.

"Dorset Fire Authority has rejected a statement which was lawful, necessary and had the full backing of both the chief fire officer and the FBU. The authority have pandered to the repugnant views of the BNP and rejected a modern vision of the fire service based on the values of equality and diversity.

"The message that this decision has sent to minority groups and communities within Dorset is appalling," said Tam McFarlane. "I urge the fire authority to reconsider their decision and join with the FBU, who will continue to press for a total ban of all members of far right organisations, including the BNP, from working within the British fire and rescue service."

Lud Ramsey knows from first-hand experience about the difficulties of challenging the BNP in the fire service and beyond. "From a young age I had to run from the National Front just because I was in the wrong part of London at the wrong time," he says. "That's one of the reasons I made a stand. I don't want my kids to go through what I had to go through.

"We knew as a Union when we took on the campaign that we were taking on the entire BNP organisation. The phone calls and emails I, and others involved in the campaign, received were horrendous. Their rules are intimidation and because of their tactics many people are scared. But more people need to challenge them."

The Union is determined to take the campaign forward and is urging members to participate.

"The B&EEMM committee would like to see a concerted effort from all FBU officials to persuade their chief fire officers and fire authorities to sign up to a statement outlining why they feel that far right and extremists have no place in the modern UK fire and rescue service," says Sam.

"We would also like to see FBU members exerting some pressure by writing to their CFO or fire authority requesting information as to why they have not made policies to protect FBU members from the virus that threatens to infect the whole service. If you are not happy with their stance do something about it. It's your right to be heard."

Members can find out where their brigade stands on the issue by visiting www.fbu.org.uk/workplace/fairness-work/index.php.

For more information about broader anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigning:

Unite Against Fascism www.uaf.org.uk

Searchlight www.searchlightmagazine.com

National Assembly Against Racism www.naar.org.uk

Let's kick racism out of football www.kickitout.org

Show Racism the Red Card www.srtrc.org



CHRIS WOODS (above), an FBU regional official in the West Midlands and long-serving firefighter, is one a number of FBU members active in fighting fascism and racism outside as well as inside the service. He has been chair for the past four years of North Staffs Campaign Against Racism and Fascism. The group, established 40 years ago in Mosley's old stamping ground, now has 100 members, including a number of FBU members.

"With my background in the FBU – with its equal opportunities and fairness and work policies – it was a natural progression to get involved in campaigning against racism and fascism outside the Fire Service and in my community," says Chris.

"We are fighting against the BNP and

the National Front. We petition town centres, do door-to-door leafleting and working together with other groups in the community. Last year in Stoke we fought a successful campaign, lobbying the chief constable and local politicians to get permission for a NF march withdrawn."

"We've had meetings with the chief fire officer expressing concern about the BNP. He has been sympathetic that we don't want anybody in the BNP in the fire service. Most Staffs city councillors – I was one for eight years – are sympathetic to this. Both Labour and Lib Dems agreed to distribute our leaflets as well as theirs at the general election.

"Both Stoke and Port Vale Football Clubs are supportive of our campaign. We've worked together,

seeking to get our message to children. Children come along to see stars and they deliver a clear message. When their idols say we don't like racists, it has a big effect. Last week there was a football match between the Asian community and the police force. We have lots of initiatives where we show that people work together in society."

"We have two BNP councillors in Stoke. They mislead with their proposals, claim that they will change things on the council and lie to the members of the public. We must ensure these racist thugs don't gain prominence. If they get a foot in the door, they'll try and exploit that. We must not allow them to. Everybody has a right to express a view – but by expressing racist views you've stepped over the line. We need to get these people off our streets."

FBU CONFERENCE RESOLUTION ON BNP MEMBERSHIP IN THE FIRE SERVICE

The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 places a general statutory duty on Public Authorities, including Fire Authorities and their Chief Officers, to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination to promote equality of opportunity and promote good relations between persons of different racial groups.

This Conference therefore calls on the Executive Council and its good offices to lobby the ODPM, CFOA and the Employers' to implement policy that would not allow any member of a Fire Service to be a member of any organisation whose constitution, aims, objectives, policies or pronouncements, contradict the general statutory duty to promote race equality. Any such organisations specifically include the BNP.

The Executive Council should give progress reports via All Members circulars.

B&EEMM, as amended by Strathclyde, FBU Annual Conference 2005

WHO ARE THE BNP?

The thoughts of BNP Chairman Nick Griffin (in 1996)

The BNP needed to be perceived as "a strong, disciplined organisation with the ability to back up its slogan, 'Defend Rights for Whites', with well directed boots and fists. When the crunch comes, power is the product of force and will, not of rational debate."

He said: "It is more important to control the streets of a city than its council chamber. If that is the sort of 'unreasonable' attitude that journalists and opponents try to use against us at election times, it shouldn't bother us."

Convicted politicians:

Nick Griffin (BNP Chairman). Received a two-year suspended sentence in April 1998 for inciting racial hatred. Griffin and BNP activist Mark Collett are awaiting trial in January on race-hate charges, which they deny. They are charged with using words or behaviour intended or likely to stir up racial hatred following the screening of a BBC documentary on the BNP in West Yorkshire.

Tony Lecomber (BNP Group Development Officer). In 1985 he was convicted on five counts for bomb-making offences under the Explosives Act, including possession of homemade hand-grenades and electronic timing devices. Sentenced to three years' imprisonment. In 1991 he was sentenced to another three years for unlawful wounding for his part in an attack on a Jewish schoolteacher. He has a total of 12 convictions, mostly for violence.

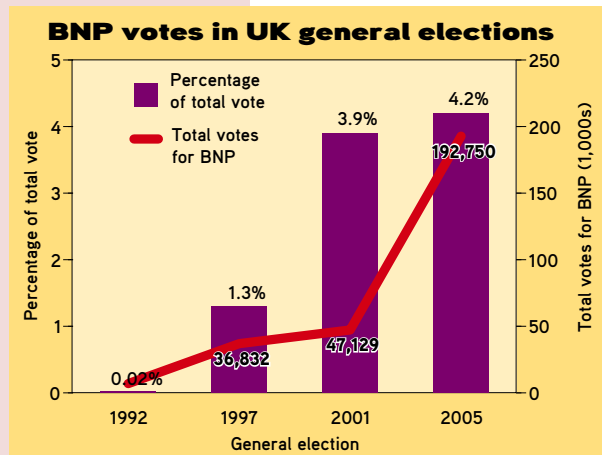
Colin Smith (South East London organiser). Has (at the last count) 17 convictions for burglary, theft, stealing cars, possession of drugs and assaulting a police officer.

John Tyndall (founder of the BNP – later expelled – who died in July this year) had six convictions. He was jailed in 1962 for organising a military-style organisation. Four years later he was sent to prison for possession of a loaded gun. In 1986, he was convicted for incitement to racial hatred under the Public Order Act and sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment.

Warren Bennett (Chief Steward). Convictions for football hooliganism. In 1998, he was deported from France with over 50 other Scottish hooligans, including several BNP members.

Steve Belshaw (East Midlands BNP organiser). Convicted in 1994 for assaulting a lawyer in Mansfield. At the time, Belshaw combined his BNP membership with activity in Combat 18 (an openly nazi semi-military organisation which carried out racist attacks including letter-bombs). Combat 18: the 1 is for A (as in Adolf) and the 8 is for H (as in Hitler).

David Copeland, the London nailbomber who killed three people, was a BNP member.



BNP EUROPEAN ELECTION RESULTS

Year	% of vote	total votes
1999	1.0%	102,644
2004	4.9%	808,200

The BNP received 8% in the European elections in Yorkshire and Humberside and 5.1% in the 2005 General Elections in West Midlands. Percentages relate to contested seats. The party fielded 119 candidates in the 2005 General election compared to 13 in 1992.

Source: Unite Against Fascism

DEVELOPMENTS IN OTHER PUBLIC SERVICES

PRISONS: Prison service head Martin Narey brought in a ban against prison officers being members of the BNP in 2002.

POLICE: "Under this policy, no member of the police service, whether police officer or police staff, may be a member of an organisation whose constitution, aims, objectives or pronouncements contradict the general duty to promote race equality. This specifically includes the British National Party. We anticipate that non-compliance will result in dismissal." (Association of Chief Police Officers President Chris Fox, July 2004)

PROBATION SERVICE: "We take the view that if the national probation service wishes to retain the confidence of all the communities it serves then a similar prohibition [to the prison service] should apply to all probation staff." (Chief Inspector of Probation Andrew Bridges, February 2005)

EDUCATION: "There is growing evidence that members of the BNP and other similar

organisations are using membership of trade unions and public sector professions to provide a cloak of respectability for their activities. NASUWT now believes the time is right for the DfES to act with regard to teachers' terms and conditions to prevent them from being members of the BNP, Combat 18 and the National Front. Those who support racist and fascist agendas have no place in the teaching profession. (Chris Keates, general secretary of teachers' union NASUWT, March 2005, who has written to Secretary of State Ruth Kelly to ask for her support)

CIVIL SERVICE: Members of the British National Party (BNP) and other far-right groups would be banned from working in the civil service, under radical plans being considered by the government. High-level discussions involving Sir John Gieve, permanent secretary at the Home Office, and other senior civil servants have taken place to discuss the move. (Personnel Today, March 2005)