



FIRE BRIGADES UNION

CONFERENCE 2022

**EXECUTIVE COUNCIL POLICY
STATEMENT**

**POLITICAL CHALLENGES FACING THE
FBU AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT**

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a devastating period for workers in the UK and across the world. The pandemic has killed almost 6 million people worldwide and more than 160,000 in the UK. It has exposed the utter failure of most governments to protect the lives and safety of citizens; a failure to plan and prepare; the undermining of health and other public services; the drive to force workers into unsafe workplaces. The result has exposed the sharp inequalities in society with the working class disproportionately paying the price for the failures of the system through illness and death.

Two years of the pandemic has hit workers economically through job losses and attacks on wages and living standards while sections of big business have enjoyed boom times throughout the periods of lockdown, including through crony contracts from government.

UK government expenditure increased significantly as a result of the pandemic in an attempt to stop the complete collapse of the economy. Nevertheless, it is a lie to claim that austerity has ended. The most recent public sector settlements confirm that public services will be squeezed further by the Johnson government. That means further attacks on the wages of public sector workers, including firefighters.

The easing of lockdown measures has also seen numerous employers in the private sector launch attacks on their employees, through job cuts, attacks on wages and the use of fire and re-hire. The FBU and the wider trade union movement must reject any attempts to divide workers between the public and private sectors; all workers need a pay rise; all workers need secure, unionised, decent jobs and conditions.

The Conservatives enjoy a 77 seat majority in the House of Commons. A change of prime minister would still leave workers facing a hard right-wing government determined to ensure that workers pay the cost of the pandemic. This will also include attempts to stoke division among working class people using nationalism, racism and xenophobia and the promotion of so called 'culture wars'. Recent years have also seen the emergence of elements of 'Trumpism' in British politics alongside the growth of fascistic conspiracy theories, for example around issues relating to the pandemic and resulting health measures, including the need for mass vaccination.

It is worth reiterating that the Tories attacks on our service are political; more than a decade of austerity, the cuts to universal credit and the lack of a safe passage for migrants in the channel are all political decisions. The Conservatives are driven by the need to resolve economic problems at the expense of workers. They are also ideologically committed to attacking public services and the workers who provide them, they were happy to clap for 'key workers' but not provide a real-terms pay increase during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Tories and their donors want to increase privatisation within as many public services as possible including the fire and rescue service. We must engage politically as a union to combat the Tories and their long assault on our members and our communities.

As Covid-19 measures ease, the FBU and the wider trade union movement will need to return to more regular political campaigning than has been possible over the past two years. Immediately, this should focus on:

- A pay rise for all workers
- Decent jobs for all
- Investment in top quality public services

There are significant political challenges facing the FBU, the trade union movement and the wider working class. The crisis facing the fire and rescue service, including underinvestment, job losses and falling real wages are unlikely to be resolved whatsoever in the absence of a major shift in government policy resulting from big political defeats for the Conservatives. The FBU therefore needs to maintain its part in campaigning in the broader labour movement.

The Labour Party

The FBU has always been a union that knows the importance of workers having a political voice – as well as an industrial one – as the two are inexorably linked. It is the people in Westminster, Holyrood, Stormont, Cardiff that dictate the background to our industrial conditions – firefighters must have a voice in these arenas, therefore FBU's political engagement is key to improving firefighters' rights, pay and conditions.

In 2015 Conference took the strategic decision to reaffiliate to the Labour Party. The FBU is not affiliated to the Scottish Labour Party or the Labour Party in Northern Ireland; no Political Fund money from members in Scotland or Northern Ireland is used in relation to the affiliation.

Affiliated trade unions saw significant policy gains during the years of the Corbyn leadership, with Labour policies increasingly reflecting those of the trade unions. The FBU played a particular role on issues such as tackling anti-trade union legislation, housing and building safety and the threat from the climate catastrophe.

Since 2020, despite a change in leadership of the Labour Party, it remains a party that has affiliated trade unions representing more than 4 million workers. It allows firefighters, postal workers, nurses, bus drivers – workers to have a voice in Westminster and this will remain so as long as trade unions are engaged and pursue a worker's agenda.

The FBU has made no secret of our disagreements with the current Labour leadership over a plethora of matters including the rowing back on radical policies; the Bakers Union disaffiliation, unjust suspensions and expulsions; pandering to the rightwing media, allowing a Tory MP into the Party and the removal of the whip from Jeremy Corbyn. We will continue to raise these concerns internally, speak out when it is required and offer solidarity to socialists where they are witch-hunted. The FBU is an independent trade union and as such we have been and will be a critical supporter of the Labour party. Affiliation does not mean endorsing every Labour policy but we must continue to engage in these structures if we are to give firefighters a voice in Westminster. The FBU will continue to play a role, working with other unions and with Labour Party members, in defending party democracy, supporting socialist MPs and councillors and building on, with no retreat from, socialist policies developed after 2015.

As an affiliate, the union will continue to support policies which advance the interests of our members and of trade union members and workers more widely and will oppose measures which contradict these aims. The FBU will continue to support and campaign for Labour MPs, councillors and candidates who support and speak out for policies and principles which reflect those of the FBU and the trade union movement and who defend democracy and members' rights within the Labour Party.

Wider political engagement

Our political engagement has and will not be consigned to just Parliaments nor to party political activity; the FBU has a long tradition of campaigning in communities across the country and we are also affiliated to many international campaigns; this demonstrably shows the wide political engagement of the FBU.

The Executive Council statement proposes that we continue the work aforementioned and further engage with newer campaigns that directly affect firefighters and their communities including the following:

- Strike Map UK
 - A worker-powered attempt to map the industrial action taking place in the UK that enables others to see the levels of action and pass on messages of solidarity and show solidarity with other workers in their struggles.

- Renters Unions e.g. ACORN
 - A mass membership organisation and network of low-income people organising for a fairer deal for our communities. They collectively campaign for good housing, good jobs, and good public services.
- SOS NHS
 - A new coalition of campaign groups and trade unions that are demanding emergency funding for the NHS from the Government to support services and staff and not the private sector.

Immediate priorities linked to our profession and to the fire and rescue service

Within the trade union and labour movement, the FBU has made a significant contribution to debates around housing safety and around the threat from climate change. There are obvious links to industrial issues in both; FBU members are on the front line in facing the building safety crisis and also in face of the growing threat from climate change (storms; wildfires; floods). The union should prioritise these two areas, in particular, over the coming period.

1. Building safety: The horrors of the Grenfell Tower disaster exposed a huge crisis in building safety in the UK. Firefighters can play a vital role in making the case for building safety and for investment in the public services which can deliver this. The FBU can build alliances at national and local level with a range of campaigners on these issues – alliances that can strengthen all of us
2. Climate catastrophe: Firefighters are already tackling the impact of climate change through wildfires, storms and floods. We need investment in our service as a part of mitigation measures. We also need fundamental economic and social change to enable a transition to a new post-carbon economy.

The FBU continues to be a significant force in the labour movement and seeks to maintain, defend and develop workplace trade unionism. This means campaigning for immediate industrial issues directly affecting us within the fire and rescue service and also being part of the wider working class movement at home and internationally.