

FireFighter

TUC Magazine of the Year

The magazine of the Fire Brigades Union www.fbu.org.uk

October 2009

UNDER ATTACK BUT FIGHTING BACK

DEFEND JOBS
DEFEND OUR
SERVICE

Make sure
YOU are at the
Westminster
Lobby and Rally
on October 21
See p10



Stand together and fight back



We have no alternative but to stand together and fight back.

Our service is under attack on many fronts. After years of trying to improve industrial relations we are now facing the worst industrial situation in the Union's history.

Members in South Yorkshire have voted for strike action. Members in Merseyside look set to follow them as a result of the sacking of one of our members which local FBU members

believe is a clear case of victimisation. As I write we already have industrial disputes under way (for action short of strike) in London and Essex.

What lies behind these battles is an endless stream of attacks on our jobs, our conditions and on the service we provide. This confrontational stance is being fuelled by the Audit Commission and a number of chief officers and politicians who are intent on undermining our Union and those who deliver the service on the frontline.

The battle in South Yorkshire is

crucial. 744 members face having their contracts terminated and new contracts imposed. Those who can't or won't accept the position will be sacked. That is the real face of so-called modernisation. The message to firefighters is: Do as we say or get lost – find another job! If the employer is able to get away with this in South Yorkshire then other employers will adopt similar tactics in an attempt to avoid having to negotiate with trade union officials. Some senior managers simply want to rule by fear and imposition. They call it

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Secretary Ken Ross explains firefighters'
anger over the effects of 'modernisation'

JEFF MITCHELL/REUTERS

modernisation, but their methods come straight from the mill owners of the Victorian era.

Unfortunately for them – they have misjudged. They have misjudged our South Yorkshire members and they have misjudged our members throughout the UK. In South Yorkshire FBU members have voted overwhelmingly for strike action, despite attempts to intimidate and create division. We have warned politicians at local and national level that our members would resist this disgraceful attack. We have been proved correct once again.

Employers must see sense

Hopefully, fire authority members in

South Yorkshire will now see sense.

They will have seen, by the strike vote, a demonstration of the determination of our members.

As *Firefighter* went to press, a mass lobby of the fire authority and rally was organised for 28 September in Barnsley. And so employers will also see the strength of support for South Yorkshire firefighters from around the country.

Hopefully they will now see sense.

They must lift the threat of termination of contracts immediately. Otherwise they will face a fight.

Nobody in the FBU wants such a fight but none of us is prepared to see South Yorkshire members treated this way.

We face fights on many fronts

– attacks on our jobs; attempts to introduce unpopular shifts as a way of cutting jobs and night time cover; eating away at conditions of service. And of course, we face a major threat from the regionalisation of controls.

Politicians of all major parties are now talking openly of major cuts in public spending. In the fire service that seems to be entirely focused on the front line.

The only way we can resist these attacks will be if we are well organised and united.

The only organisation which defends the fire service is our Union – the Fire Brigade Union.

Stand together – defend our service.

Matt Wrack

LETTERS

Lives on the line

My thoughts and condolences are with the families and brigade of those who lost and risked their lives in Edinburgh. The public must realise that all firefighters put their lives on the line each and every time they turn out.

There must be a public inquiry into the fatal fire in Camberwell. The press should hold their heads in shame for some of their comments about the service. Would they swap their computers or pens for a firefighters' job? I think not.

I am also appalled that LFB have awarded a contract for possible strike breaking ("Strike Breaking Force will cost £12 m", August/September 2009, page 4). This can only be the start of going back to when brigades had their own engines and checked to see if the building was insured before tackling any outbreak.

Maurice Scott
OOT, Leeds

Stupid and brainless

When I first read about the proposed 'Dad's Army' strike force I thought it was just the latest in a string of hare-brained ideas from a totally incompetent Government. Alas it would appear not.

What I can't come to terms with and find quite sickening is the thought that any retired firefighter whether ex-FBU or not would even think of strike breaking. Recently retired myself, I would like to send this message to those Stupid, Crass And Brainless individuals

contemplating joining 'Dad's Army': Don't sell your soul! If you do, stand by for a rotten egg coming your way!

Nigel Scott
OOT Nottingham

Don't forget Iraq

In Mick Shaw's article on his visit to Colombia ("Justice for Colombia", August/September 2009, page 7), he called for continuing support for trade unionists' fight for justice there.

I had the privilege of visiting Iraqi Kurdistan in the name of the FBU and would ask all officials and members not to forget our sister and brother trade unionists in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iraqi trade unionists have never had and still do not have labour laws and at great risk to themselves and their families they continue to pursue those rights. Nothing, if anything, has improved for trade unionists. They still live in fear and danger.

So please, to borrow the President's words: "add weight to the calls to the UK government," to assist in achieving rights for our fellow trade unionists in Iraq.

Val Salmon
Greater Manchester

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Meet Jen Blacker, firefighter
and melodeon player for an
all-woman Morris dancing group

PAUL HERRMANN

October 2009

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JESS HURD/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

COLIN McPHERSON



Victimised FBU official Kevin Hughes outside Whiston fire station, Liverpool

Union moves to strike ballot

KEVIN HUGHES VICTIMISATION

Kevin Hughes, vice-chair of Merseyside FBU has lost his appeal against dismissal. Councillors on a fire authority panel rejected his appeal by three to two, with Labour and Tory councillors voting together against two Lib Dem councillors, according to one of the panel members, who revealed this to the local Liverpool Daily Post.

He was dismissed by Merseyside FRS after allegations of assault involving a manager's son which Kevin Hughes has always denied. Police investigated thoroughly but there was not enough evidence even to charge him.

FBU Merseyside brigade secretary Les Skarratts said: "The decision is very disappointing as we believe we presented a very strong case. We highlighted all of the procedural flaws in the disciplinary process. The investigating officer had not received the required training in the disciplinary procedures and this perhaps explained why he took the manager's son to the police station and stayed with him while he gave his statement."

At the appeal fire authority treasurer Kieran Timmins, who took the original hearing, confirmed he had not received specific training on the disciplinary procedures as is required by the Grey Book. Despite this, the appeal panel concluded it made no difference.

"Many of the Fire Authority's witnesses were entirely inconsistent in their testimony," said Les Skarratts. "At one point, incredibly, one witness said that three other fire authority witnesses must have been lying."

"We also do not believe we could have done more to show that, on the balance of probabilities, the incident could not have occurred as alleged."

"We adhered to the agreed procedures," said Les Skarratts. "We acted properly and responsibly in presenting our case to the appeals committee and defending Kevin Hughes all in accordance with the agreed disciplinary procedures." The union does not believe the fire authority acted in the same manner. A strike ballot is under way.

Isle of Wight official and learning rep dies

PAUL FLETCHER

Scores of Isle of Wight firefighters, police and paramedics took part in a moving parade at the funeral of Paul Fletcher, 39, an award-winning Isle of Wight crew manager, former policeman, naval officer, FBU official and learning rep.

The streets were lined by members of the public paying their respects as the coffin was taken on a fire engine from Newport Fire Station to the Minster Church of St Thomas, Newport, for his funeral on 9 September.

Paul died in hospital in the early hours of 24 August, after collapsing whilst attending an incident at Camp Hill Prison.

He had recently been elected chair of FBU Southern Region, following on from his highly successful role of the region's union learning fund coordinator, helping ensure the Isle of Wight was the first UK FRS to achieve the Go Fire Award. He won the Local Government Go Award ULR of the Year and a Learndirect award which he was due to collect at a ceremony in October. This will now be collected by his wife and father who will be attending along with representatives of the IoW FRS and FBU.

Acting EC Member Ricky Matthews said: "Paul was a positive influence on us all. His enthusiasm to help others was contagious, he had the ability to bowl over chief fire



Paul Fletcher's funeral

Donations in memory of Paul to:
Name of Fund: Paul Fletcher Memorial Fund
Name of Bank: Unity Trust Bank PLC
Account Number: 33018807
Sort Code: 08-60-01

officers and inspire FBU members to take up the learning opportunities he had created for them. Many of these members have followed in his footsteps of helping others and are taking up positions within the FBU.

"Paul also had a wider influence in the trade union movement. He was one of the first activists on the scene offering help to the workers in the Vestas factory and spoke on behalf of the FBU when the campaign took hold.

"Paul always had a smile on his face, and I am glad I had the pleasure to work with him and call him a friend."

Boost your brain power

NATIONAL SCHOOL 2009

Want to update your knowledge, and develop your skills and confidence to engage in debates covering current fire service employment issues and other matters such as fairness and equality?

Want to boost your effectiveness of organising, both in the workplace and working with other trade unions across our communities?

Then come to the FBU's National School running from Sunday 1 November

to Friday 6 November, at Wortley Hall near Sheffield.

The school will seek to assist reps to develop trade union strategies to deal with modernisation of the fire service and broader campaigns and will give students the opportunity to hear contributions from both national and international guest speakers. It also includes a visit to the National Coalmining Museum and NUM Headquarters in Yorkshire.

Guest speakers include John Hendy QC; Professor Gregor Gall; John McDonnell

MP; and representatives of the NUM and the local mining communities and from foreign trade unions.

The school is open to all members and there will be a second year group for those who have attended a previous first year of the National School.

→ To apply, ask for an application form from your local rep or download from www.fbu.org.uk, fill it in and return it by 20 October to Sean Starbuck, Fire Brigades Union, Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT2 7AE.

Sounding off!

JOHN MCGHEE

National Officer

HSE inspections

The Health and Safety Executive has now issued the reports from the first two fire and rescue services to be inspected in a programme of proactive inspections.

The HSE is inspecting a total of eight brigades over the next year – Hampshire, Norfolk, Durham and Darlington, Cornwall, GMC, North Wales, Oxfordshire and Grampian. They are inspecting procedures for "The Management of Health and Safety".

These first two reports, on Hampshire and Norfolk, (available at www.fbu.org.uk) have already exposed a number of similarities in the failure of brigades to have adequate processes in place.

In the case of Norfolk, the HSE considered enforcement action and in both cases have given clear recommendations for improvement.

These inspections have focused on four areas:

- ◆ Training and competence in core firefighter skills
- ◆ BA training
- ◆ Competence for incident command
- ◆ Provision of risk critical information.

These inspections, which have come after lobbying over the past three years, are welcome. Along with other safety representatives, I was concerned at the sudden rush, under the guise of modernisation, from intervention to prevention



John McGhee: concerns well founded

and its affect on the amount of practical training taking place throughout the service.

Two and a half years ago, I invited the head of the HSE for fire to hear first-hand from our regional H&S coordinators concerns about the provision of adequate training. It is still early days. But the initial reports indicate that our concerns were well founded.

We will continue to press the fire and rescue service to improve the situation for our members and find a better balance between prevention and intervention. After all, they have a duty to protect not just the public but also our members.

As the remaining reports are completed they will be available on the Union's web site for your information. On the completion of the programme it is the intention of the HSE to produce an overarching report for the whole of the service. You will be kept informed of the progress we make.

In brief

Union executive council member Tam MacFarlane highlighted the FBU's fire safety policy for sprinklers to be fitted in new and existing housing stock and continued to press for a public inquiry into the fatal high rise fire in Camberwell. He said: "although tragic, this incident could have been so much worse if it wasn't for the speed and professionalism of London firefighters". He said: "The FBU has been pressing for more effective fire suppression systems in high rise buildings, including sprinklers, ever since two firefighters were killed in a high rise fire in Hertfordshire early in 2005. Now here we are, over four years later and against the background of another fatal high rise fire still demanding action."



Tam (above) was speaking at TUC Congress to the composite motion (13) on housing that included an amendment from the FBU. There were also interventions from General Secretary Matt Wrack on a motion on pensions (C10) and executive council member Vicky Knight moved an emergency motion (E5) on Sri Lanka.

A "Firefighters Memorial Garden" has been opened next to Alcester Fire Station as a tribute and celebration to the four firefighters, Darren Yates-Badley, Ashley Stephens (from Alcester Station) and Ian Reid and John Averis (from Stratford-upon-Avon station) who lost their lives on 2 November 2007 in the Athertone-on-Stour warehouse fire. At an opening garden party, family members of the four men unveiled slate name plaques while a bronze helmet centre piece was unveiled by Darren's Mum, Mandy and Ashley's Mum, Sharon. The garden, created by temporary watch manager, David Vale, is now open for all to visit.

FBU 'will not sit idly by' if controls face closure

TUC CONGRESS

The Union told delegates assembled in Liverpool for the annual TUC Congress that it would take strike action rather than allow the closure of emergency fire control rooms throughout England and their replacement with regional centres.

The FireControl project would lead to mass redundancies and place the public at greater risk, the Union argued.

Presenting the FBU motion (66) on the issue, FBU general secretary Matt Wrack said: "For the government, this is a technological solution, but there are a number of major flaws."

The technology had run into major problems, the general secretary said, adding: "this is too important an issue to put down to trial and error."

"The government believes that computers and



Matt Wrack: strike warning

technology can replace people. In this situation, that is simply not the case."

Matt Wrack called on the government to pledge to save the current system and warned that should they move to remove it the Union would "not sit idly by."

Delegates back boycott call

Congress voted to support a boycott of goods from "illegal" Israeli settlements along with a call for an end to arms sales to the country after a debate that followed the FBU's widely supported motion on the issue.

Congress also condemned Israeli trade union federation Histadrut's statement supporting Israel's war on Gaza – which killed 1,450 Palestinians in three weeks – and called for a review of the TUC's relationship with Histadrut.

The TUC ruling general council held lengthy talks in private prior to Thursday's final Congress session before agreeing a statement that was accepted by delegates.

The statement read: "To increase the pressure for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the removal of the separation wall and illegal settlements, we will support a boycott of those goods and agricultural products that originate in illegal settlements through developing an effective, targeted, consumer-led boycott campaign."

The Union, whose delegation was headed by General Secretary Matt Wrack, had pushed for a stronger campaign, including encouraging trade unionists to boycott Israeli goods.

Its motion – amended by UCU – was also passed, although the general council

statement takes precedence.

FBU president Mick Shaw told delegates there had been "unbelievable human suffering" in the attack on Gaza at the start of the year. And he criticised the British government for refusing to condemn the attack and questioned the response of Histadrut.

The TUC already had a policy of calling for Israeli troop withdrawal, but Mick Shaw said it was time to go further.

"We have a history of supporting boycotts, such as the one against apartheid in South Africa. There is no doubt that had an effect," he said, adding that a boycott would demonstrate to the Palestinian people that the rest of the world cared.

FBU slams Brown on public service spending cuts

The Union criticised Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who chose the TUC Congress to finally admit he would cut spending on public services.

Matt Wrack said: "The frontline of the fire service is being targeted for savage cuts right here and now. Yet corporate and management jobs have increased by 40% since Labour came to office. Tough spending choices may have to be made, but they also need to be the right choices. The test will be if Gordon Brown starts protecting the frontline

from cuts rather than just saying he will."

Mr Brown said he would make the cuts after the recession was over and claimed he would protect frontline services, accusing the Tories of planning "across-the-board public spending cuts" to fund tax breaks for the rich. He said the axe would fall on "lower-priority" services budgets, but gave no indication of what these would be.

→ For Congress decisions and key speeches visit www.tuc.org.uk/congress

Dispute is settled as members stay united

HUMBERSIDE

The three-month dispute in Humberside has been settled.

Senior managers had sought to impose a new transfer policy for firefighters that members felt unfairly penalised them via a point scoring system dreamed up by management.

The FBU also believed that the fire authority was "managing vacancies" rather than tackling the shortfall in establishment.

Offers of secondary contracts paid at below NJC "Grey Book" rates for "community fire technicians" roles and non-compliance with the nationally agreed industrial relations protocol were also part of the dispute.

Humberside members displayed great unity in opposing these issues and had been engaged in industrial action short of a strike – including an overtime ban – between June 17 and 8 September.

The matter of transfers was finally resolved by an agreement on a revised transfer policy, reached with the assistance of the National Joint Secretaries. On the issue of secondary contracts, it was agreed that the brigade and the Union would advise members about the pitfalls of the injury compensation scheme. A way forward has also been mapped on the other issues – which include CPD payments.

Said brigade secretary Pete Smith: "It was because our members were 100 per cent solid with this action that we achieved an acceptable settlement. It was a good result all round. Hats off to the members!"

→ For more on the campaigns and disputes against attacks on jobs, pay and conditions see page 12.

HOWARD DAVIES



Sean Starbuck with some of the thousands of grievance forms gathered by the FBU

Pensions justice nearer

PENSION COMMUTATION

The FBU's campaign for fairer pensions commutation has achieved success with more firefighters now to receive a lump sum payment.

The Department for Communities and Local Government has revised the retrospective application date that should be applied to the 1992 Firefighters' Pension Scheme (FPS) actuarial factors to calculate the payment from 1 October 2007 to 22 August 2006. CLG took the decision, following legal advice, after receiving thousands of FBU grievances.

The FBU campaign was launched in August 2008 after the announcement in May 2008 of new improved gender-neutral commutation factors for the FPS. As part of the campaign, the Union asked out of trade members to use a downloadable model grievance form from the FBU website to raise the issue with CLG and the Government Actuary's Department and, ultimately, the Pension Ombudsman. Over 5,000 did so.

While the FBU was progressing this issue through a grievance route, the Police Federation was progressing a similar issue through a judicial review. The FBU also raised the issue at various Firefighters' Pension Committee meetings

and was told by CLG representatives that it was progressing the matter through the wrong route and that it could not be dealt with while the Police Federation's legal challenge was ongoing.

The Police Federation was claiming that the retrospective application date should be 1 December 2006, while the FBU was claiming a much earlier date. The FBU secured information that the Government Actuary's Department had written to CLG in August 2006 highlighting these new factors, almost 22 months before the May 2008 date and

'This action has resulted in many FBU members receiving the financial package they are entitled to'

15 months before the 1 October 2007 retrospective application date they were suggesting.

In March 2009, the Police Federation was successful in its judicial review. A retrospective application date of 1 December 2006 was introduced for the Police Pension Scheme. This strengthened the FBU claim, but the Police Pension Scheme settlement did not satisfy the FBU's outstanding claims.

The FBU had previously informed CLG that all these retrospective payments must

be subject to interest payments and should be exempt from the tax implications that surround second lump sum payments.

The Union will now be looking at the CLG decision and will take legal advice on the outstanding grievances that deal with claims to progress a challenge to extend the retrospective application date until 2001. A decision will be taken on receipt of this advice.

General Secretary Matt Wrack said: "I would like to thank everyone involved in this successful action which has resulted in many FBU members receiving the financial package they are entitled to."

National Officer Sean Starbuck said: "The FBU is now discussing options with Thompsons solicitors with regard to an earlier implementation date.

"People will realise that it is only the FBU who could have raised this grievance but, more importantly, it was only the FBU who did take it on. The FBU continues to fight against attacks on all the firefighters' pension schemes and this campaign shows that we do have a great deal of clout when we organise around an issue."

→ More details on Firefighters' Pension Scheme Circular 7/2009 at www.fbu.org.uk



VIEW FROM THE AERIAL LADDER PLATFORM

Glasgow firefighters tackle
a blaze in June 2004 at a
scrapyard near the city's
international airport

JEFF J MITCHELL UK/REUTERS

How to prevent another tragedy

KEN ROSS, SCOTTISH REGIONAL SECRETARY, FBU

“The tragic death of Firefighter Ewan Williamson in Edinburgh on 12 July 2009 has reverberated throughout fire and rescue services (FRSs) in the UK, but particularly in Scotland.

The shock is still tangible, no more so than amongst his family and close colleagues in Tollcross Fire Station. However, what makes this tragedy even harder to take, is that we knew a tragedy like this was coming. So that shock is now turning into simple anger.

For the past five years, the FBU has been warning anyone who would listen that the service in Scotland was heading for a tragedy such as this. So how come it still happened?

In 2005 the Fire (Scotland) Act came into force, replacing the Fire Services Act 1947, which served the service and the country well. The new legislation was supposed to be the bedrock of a new ‘modernised’ service that did away with apparently ‘outdated’ elements and brought in new measures that were designed to improve the service we provide to communities.

Among the elements that were removed included the National Standards for Responses to Incidents; Appointments and Promotions Regulations; and Uniformed Establishment Protection Measures (Section 19). Chief fire officers also put themselves at the centre, arguing that they were the ones who should be running the Service, as “they knew best”.

Well, in the past five years how has the service fared under their watch?

Firstly, due to the removal of national standards, the eight FRSs in Scotland are moving in eight different directions. Differing response times, levels of response, training levels, competency levels, promotion criteria, equipment specifications ... the list goes on. This makes it extremely difficult for services to work together, particularly in the context of a major incident, where overall resilience needs to be compatible and consistent.

On top of that:

- The number of fire deaths and injuries is up – by 62 per cent last year alone;
- The number of firefighter fatalities is up – more firefighters have died on duty in the past five years than the previous 30;
- Response times to incidents are up; and
- The number of fire stations being downgraded or closed is up.

In addition to all these increases, we are seeing:

- The number of frontline firefighters going

down – approximately 220 firefighters fewer are riding fire appliances than in 2005;

- The number of fire appliances is down; and
- The number of aerial appliances is down.

To add insult to injury, there has been no operational guidance issued in the fire service for five years.

And to top it all off, firefighters now work in an atmosphere of fear, due to an explosion of HR departments that in many cases have brought with them an aggressive, hardline and confrontational approach to personnel issues and industrial relations. Consequently, the number of firefighters who have been dismissed has vastly increased, as has the number of discipline investigations, hearings and employment tribunals. Experienced professional firefighters are either being thrown on the scrapheap, or being demotivated. Morale is at an all-time low.

Overall, the services are fragmenting; consistency and standards are being lost; resources are being depleted; and the service

to our communities is deteriorating. This is disgraceful and unacceptable.

If we are serious about wanting to avoid another firefighter death, about reducing fire deaths and injuries to the public,

about improving response times and levels of response to incidents, about safeguarding the number of frontline firefighter posts, fire stations and appliances, and about properly and consistently imparting and maintaining firefighters skills, whilst keeping them motivated and secure in their job, employers and government have to act now.

There is an opportunity to make the necessary changes that can achieve all of these things. The governance structures for FRSs in Scotland, for example, must be overhauled not only to include and reflect those who are the main players in the service – Scottish Government, local government, managers, and most importantly, the FBU that represents those who deliver the service – but to establish a mechanism that ensures a collective approach and input to strategy, policy and standards for all FRSs in Scotland.

We know how to truly improve the service and to avoid another firefighter’s death. The answers are staring us all in the face. The necessary improvements must be made and the safeguards and other required measures must be put in place.

We owe it to the people and firefighters of Scotland. **”**

Lobby for the future

The FBU will be going to Westminster on October 21, making the case against regional controls and cuts to frontline services – and for investment and national standards. Make sure you are there too!

ANDREW WARD



When you see your MP in Westminster on 21 October your message needs to be loud and clear: enough is enough!

It is time to stop chucking public money at regional controls, an unworkable project of huge and ever rising costs that will not save a single life. It is time to stop mistreating fire control staff, threatening their jobs, pay and conditions. It is time, instead, to value them as an essential part of the professional team that makes the fire service one of the finest public services in the UK.

And there must be a stop to cuts to front-line fire services and the demoralising attacks on firefighters' working conditions, fuelled by central Government demands for £200 million budget cuts.

Instead, we need to invest. And we need to reverse the chaos that is spreading throughout the fire service.

Today there is a postcode lottery of fire cover, of training, of brigade operational procedures, of equipment and of fire safety enforcement.

Government needs to accept that while fire services are locally delivered, it is a national

If necessary a new national structure should be created which includes all the key voices within the service

service. Local fire and rescue services have to work together at national incidents, both fire-related and other types of emergencies. If it wants national resilience, the Government has to realise that it cannot be delivered under the current regime.

What we need is common standards nationwide. If necessary a new national structure should be created which includes all the key voices within the service, the union, employers, government and chief officers. This would also need to take account of the different situation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – but there also needs to be planning at a UK level.

Such a structure needs to be given the teeth to ensure these national standards are adhered to in every fire and rescue service.

The Government says it wants to protect frontline services. We welcome this commitment. Please tell your MP that we expect them to honour it.

→ Write NOW to your MP, asking for a meeting on 21 October to discuss your concerns about the regional control project, the attacks on frontline fire services and to put our vision for the future.

WHAT TO ASK YOUR MP TO DO



ON REGIONAL CONTROLS

Call on the Government to:

- **halt to FireControl Project and divert funds to improving existing controls and frontline service**
- **provide assurances that in the event FiReControl does go ahead that there will be no compulsory redundancies, there will be FBU recognition and Fire Service Grey Book pay, terms and conditions**

ON THE WIDER FIRE SERVICE

Call on the Government to honour its talk about protecting front line services by delivering:

- **investment, not cuts to frontline jobs and services**
- **an end to the post code lottery of fire service**
- **national standards for training provided to firefighters – from trainees onwards**
- **national standards for equipment**
- **national standardisation of brigade operational procedures**
- **the creation of a national regime for the enforcement of legislative fire safety**

**DEFEND JOBS
DEFEND OUR
SERVICE**

Autumn of

Fire authorities are seeking to make cuts to budgets on the backs of firefighters, risking the safety of the communities our members serve. The fightback is well under way

As many as 8,000 FBU members – around one in five firefighters in England – have been taking industrial action at any one time since August. Many more firefighters and brigades are on the brink of a dispute.

At stake are over 1,200 jobs, the closure of dozens of fire stations, a return to Victorian-style shifts and attempts to cut CPD payments and allowances. And the imposition of changes on the workforce, without their agreement or that of the FBU. The backdrop to all this is Government demands for £200 million of “efficiency” savings, even while it is spending millions – and committed to at least £1.4 billion – on the regional fire control project that will not save a single life and which nobody in the fire service wants.

South Yorkshire

This dispute in some ways has the most significant and widest implications. 744 firefighters will be sacked January 1 2010 and forced to work under new contracts that include 12-hour day shifts, up from nine hours. Quite apart from the huge number of members’ jobs at stake, the drive by management to terminate contracts in order to unilaterally impose change could set a dangerous precedent in the UK fire and rescue service that threatens every FBU member.

South Yorks members responded to the move – a bid to make “efficiency” savings of £4 million – by taking industrial action short of a strike, including an overtime ban, and a change in the way detached duties are performed. This could further escalate following a widely expected ‘Yes’ vote for strike action in a ballot that was due to close

UNDER ATTACK

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- Imposition of change
- Axing frontline staff
- Closing fire stations
- Cutting CPD pay, overtime payments and allowances
- Victimisation of union officials
- Detrimental changes to shift system

FIGHT BACK

INDUSTRIAL ACTION

- Overtime bans
- Changes to performing detached duties
- Ballots for strikes

cuts to one in ten of the station-based firefighters and other imposed changes.

The rolling programme of cuts, starting 1 October, will see the number of firefighters reduced by “managed vacancies” from 954 firefighters in December 2008, to an average of 940 during 2008/9, to 920 during 2009/10, to 905 in March 2010.

Forty four of those jobs – one in ten of the frontline fire station based crews – would go by a move to switch-crewing – changing the way higher reach aerial ladder platforms and rescue tenders are crewed. The impact would be there not being enough firefighters to crew all appliances, even if they were needed in a 999 emergency. Says regional secretary, Adrian Clarke: “These changes will mean a worse service to the public. That can’t be right and our members rightly reject it.”

London

Senior managers are making attempts to cut pay by making it more difficult for firefighters to get their £1,000 continuous professional development payments.

There are also cuts to other allowances. This included injured firefighters returning to duty also having their pay cut. Those who

At stake are unacceptable moves to impose changes without agreement with the workforce and the FBU

days after *Firefighter* went to press.

A lobby of the fire authority, march and rally was planned for 28 September in Barnsley, with FBU members and reps from across the UK expected to attend.

Says regional secretary Ian Murray: “Only those firefighters who accept imposed contractual change will be re-employed. If they get away with not negotiating with the FBU and with using bully-boy tactics to change our conditions of service here, they can get away with it anywhere. We can’t let them do that. We need to stand united against this management dictat.”

Essex

Members have been engaged in an overtime ban and a refusal to act up in a dispute over

refused to move away from nationally agreed terms and conditions have been threatened with demotion.

Members returned in a ballot a result of 9-1 in favour of action short of a strike. Starting 13 August, the industrial action consists of a ban on voluntary activities such as overtime and refusing to act up for more senior staff.

As *Firefighter* went to press, the action was biting: at any one time an average of 15 fire stations were out of action and 50 pumps off the run.

London regional official Paul Embery says the action has exposed the huge staff deficiencies in the brigade caused by 1,500 frontline job cuts over the past 20 years.

“In recent days, the damage this reckless management of London fire service has

discontent

caused has been exposed.

“London fire brigade must stop attacking firefighters’ jobs, pay and conditions and focus on their job – protecting the public.”

Attacks on jobs, pay and conditions are also threatening to spiral into full-blown industrial disputes elsewhere.

Lancashire

In this brigade, 92 posts out of 736, or 1 in 8 firefighter posts are under threat. Lancashire fire authority, which complains of a total 2% increase in budget over the years 2008-2010, has plans afoot to introduce an 84-hour week to make £2.7 million cash savings.

It’s a return to Victorian-style fire stations, says brigade secretary Steve Harman: “We cannot accept an 84-hour week. There is nothing modern about working hours that hark back to the 19th century.”

There are also plans to replace a pump at Blackpool, which has played a key role responding to several major fires in the last 12 months, with a “toy” fire engine.

East Midlands

In Lincolnshire, meanwhile, 104 firefighters are threatened with the sack over complex shift changes that will see the removal from frontline duties of 16 watch managers, with the shortfall made up by existing staff working a new shift system.

Elsewhere in the East Midlands, up to three fire stations – Moira, Ashby and possibly Syston – in Leicestershire face closure with the loss of as many as 50 retained firefighter jobs. And in Derbyshire, the brigade has been running 30% under retained establishment for such a lengthy period that the Union fears this is part of a strategy to close fire stations.

Warwickshire

Here, there are plans to cut a third of all fire appliances, close seven fire stations – the biggest cuts and closures plan ever proposed by a fire service.

The stations proposed for closure are Studley, Bidford, Brinklow, Fenny Compton, Kenilworth, Warwick and Bedworth. Appli-

ances crewed by firefighters working the retained duty system (RDS) will also be removed from Coleshill and Atherstone.

Around 100 RDS firefighters would be axed under the plans. The cuts are being proposed in what is bizarrely called a ‘service improvement plan’.

Mark Rattray, Warwickshire FBU brigade secretary says: “The FBU will vehemently oppose any downgrading or reduction of frontline services. We believe that the people of Warwickshire should not suffer cuts to frontline services.

“The fire service should be given the correct funding to maintain and enhance the level of service that the communities of Warwickshire deserve.”

→ CORRECTION In the last edition of Firefighter (August/September 2009, News) the article stated that members in South Yorkshire were refusing to undertake detached duties as part of their industrial action. This was incorrect. The action involves altering the way those detached duties are carried out.



ANDREW WIARD

Fire authorities reject regional controls plan

Government is now thoroughly isolated

Fire authorities in England have gone public with their opposition to the regional controls project.

In what should be the final nail in the coffin of the disastrous centrally led FiReControl project, the Local Government Association said in a press statement that fire authority leaders were calling for it to be “halted” and were now examining “possible alternatives”.

The English fire authority councillors’ decision was made at a meeting of the Local Government Association’s Fire Services Management Committee on 18 September. They voted 10-4 in favour of the following motion:

“The Fire Services Management Committee is against the principle of the implementation of Regional Control Centres however will continue to engage with CLG to ensure FRAs are properly resourced, will afford effective oversight and review the programme regularly on behalf of the Fire and Rescue Authorities and will continue to promote good industrial relations where applicable and asks LGA

‘Fire authorities are in the dark about how emergency calls will be handled in the years to come’

officers to develop alternative options in the event of project failure, to be brought back to the Fire Services Management Committee at a future date.”

The decision of fire authority councillors to “oppose the centres” comes after they had expressed deep concern about the ongoing delays in the project and whether any revised timescales would be met, said the LGA.

The LGA said in its press statement: “The proposals to introduce regional control centres that would receive emergency calls on behalf of several fire authorities have been beset by delays and spiralling costs”.

It complained of ministers’ first announcement of a delay to the scheme in October 2008, then the further ten month “hold up”, revealed in July this year, which means that all the centres would not be up and running until the end of 2012.

Fire authorities would “now consider other possible alternatives”.

Councillor Brian Coleman, chair of the Fire Services Management Committee, said: “This project is fast becoming a white elephant. Spiralling costs and continued delays mean that fire authorities are in the dark about how emergency calls will be handled in the years to come. It is time to end



PAUL BOX/REPORTDIGITAL.CO.UK

**DEFEND JOBS
DEFEND OUR
SERVICE**

GARRETT BROOKS

FIRE SAFETY OFFICER, FINCHLEY FIRE STATION, LONDON
AND B&EMM REP, LONDON

“The FireControl project has been a disaster from day one and just keeps getting worse. Control staff are being treated disgracefully and the threat to their jobs and conditions is appalling. We are one union and an injury to one is an injury to all.

We need to be there on 21 October to make sure MPs know the facts and to ask them to press Government to put a stop to this madness.



JEAN WESTWOOD

EMERGENCY FIRE CONTROL OPERATOR
AND NORTH EAST CONTROL REP

“For control staff, and for the safety of firefighters and the public, we need to go to parliament on October 21.

We need to tell our MPs that FireControl is far too expensive and won't work.

We need to ask them to pass on the message to ministers that regional controls should be scrapped, and scrapped now.



this uncertainty and abandon this expensive and unnecessary scheme.

“Upgrading existing control rooms would be better value for the taxpayer while delivering the communications improvements that will benefit fire crews. Spending almost £400 million on regional centres is no longer feasible in the current economic climate.”

The move to reject the project by fire authority councillors follows a change in the view of the Chief Fire Officers Association to FiReControl to a highly sceptical “position”.

The department of Communities and Local Government remained in denial about the catastrophic fortunes of the project in the face of what is now total opposition to it in England's fire and rescue service, coupled with endless delays, soaring costs and major technical problems.

In a statement issued in response to the LGA's announcement, CLG said: “FiReControl will dramatically improve the Fire and Rescue Service's ability to respond

effectively to major regional and national emergencies. It will improve public and firefighter safety on a day-to-day basis by establishing, for the first time, a nationally linked network of control centres for handling 999 calls and mobilising Fire and Rescue

‘They should abandon the project now and invest in existing emergency fire controls’

Service resources. The Government remains completely committed to its delivery and will continue to work constructively with all parties to ensure its success.”

Sharon Riley, FBU executive council member for emergency fire control staff members, said: “This should be the final nail in the coffin of FiReControl. After the chief

fire officers gave the project the thumbs down, now fire authority councillors have rejected it.

“This project is now totally undeliverable and wholly unsupported by anyone within the fire and rescue service. The department of Communities and Local Government is thoroughly isolated.

“It ought to know that the game is up. But it still does not seem to be listening.

“The current economic climate and deteriorating public finances means Government may have to make tough choices on public spending. It is surely time for a rethink.

“They should abandon the project now and invest in existing emergency fire controls so we can get back to providing a first class service for the public.

“It is crucial we continue to underline the message that the fire service is united in opposition to regional controls. Make sure you come to the lobby of Westminster on 21 October, so MPs hear your voice of opposition loud and clear.”

PETER MOSS

VICE CHAIR AND NORTH WEST REGION REP,
OFFICERS NATIONAL COMMITTEE

“I will be attending the FBU rally and lobby of Parliament on 21 October. It is vital that FBU members take the opportunity to talk to MPs so that they fully understand that cuts to budgets inevitably lead to a worsening service and increase the risks to both the public and firefighters alike. It is also important that officer members are represented and attend.

This will emphasise to MPs that the FBU is the professional voice for all firefighters at all levels within the fire and rescue service.



ANDY GOULD

FIREFIGHTER AND BRANCH REP, PAIGNTON,
DEVON AND SOMERSET

“I will going to the lobby and rally and will be encouraging as many of my colleagues in my brigade who can to join me.

It is important that MPs are aware of what regional controls are about and that they in turn make sure parliament and ministers reject the plans.

It is important to show politicians that you can't make wholesale changes to the fire service without proper consultation and agreement with the workforce and its representatives.



WHAT'S MY ROLE?

Stephen Mitchell Watch manager and Lothian and Borders FBU gay and lesbian rep

The FBU champions equality. There is no place for homophobia in the fire service and all members deserve dignity and respect at work. This is spelt out clearly in the union's rule book (rule 24). But some gay and lesbian members are reluctant to come out to colleagues because negative stereotyping can still blight lives. They should not have to be fearful. Which is why union delegates at this year's conference voted unanimously for more education and awareness of the issues gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) colleagues face at work.

As an out gay watch manager, Stephen Mitchell has a personal stake in helping combat such negative attitudes. Stephen, Blue Watch manager at Galashiels in Lothian and Borders, and the FBU's LGBT rep for the brigade, urged fellow delegates to back the conference move. He has agreed to speak personally in *Firefighter* about his role as an "out" gay firefighter, FBU LGBT rep and watch manager.



I consider myself lucky to be working in Lothian and Borders – one of the most progressive brigades in the

UK in equalities work. I'm a watch manager with 15 years experience in the fire service. I'm comfortable being out in the workplace but realise some colleagues don't find it that easy. They may have to put up with negative attitudes and so-called banter which is homophobic and can be offensive and hurtful. So their decision is not surprising.

Everyone should feel safe and respected at work. I only know of one other openly gay

Deciding whether to come out at work or not should be down to personal choice and the privacy of those who decide not to should be respected

male firefighter in the brigade, although there are more lesbian women. And there are others who would not feel comfortable coming out to work colleagues. Some have been working on a watch for years. Imagine the stress of keeping an important part of yourself under wraps.

Deciding whether to come out at work or not should be down to personal choice and the privacy of those who decide not to should be respected. But we have to look at the reasons people are reluctant to do so. These were explored in the motion on LGBT education and awareness at conference, which I was happy to second.

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES FOR A G&L REP

- ◆ Providing support to LGBT members in your respective brigade/region of the FBU
- ◆ Identifying and dealing with any issues/problems faced by our members, and feed through structure of union so as to deal with effectively
- ◆ Encourage lesbian, gay bisexual and trans participation in mainstream FBU issues
- ◆ Engage with local FBU officials and chief fire officers about our LGBT issues in the fire service

Not all the people who appear in pictures in this article are LGBT

FRASER BARN



My LGBT colleague Norman Perry spoke of the extreme bullying and harassment some members had suffered. I focussed on the need to tackle indirect actions and attitudes that can affect LGBT members daily – which can come down to the language and attitudes displayed at work. It can have a devastatingly negative impact on LGBT members – and offend many straight colleagues too. I spoke of the need for a culture change so all members feel safe and valued at work.

Not all workplaces are the same, and people can have different experiences. But I know from talking to other FBU colleagues that there are stations where 'groupthink' and the macho male-dominated stereotype does still come through despite equality policies and legislation. This is bad for women members and black and other ethnic minority firefighters too. It all comes down to respect and basic human decency.

Those FRSs that have signed up to the Stonewall Diversity Challenge – including Lothian and Borders – are already on the case. In our FRS, LGBT awareness is already part of our diversity training, and all managers throughout our brigade are to be trained in issues affecting LGBT members in the next phase of our diversity training.



Stephen Mitchell with
watch colleagues at
Galashiels station

We have an LGBT networking group who consult on policy and equality issues and this year we had a very visible presence at Scotia Pride. The FBU has an excellent LGBT section for the support of members and the annual school celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2008. There is commitment

My watch – all men – know who I am, what I stand for, my beliefs, what I will and won't tolerate and respect me for the kind of manager and colleague I am

from both the Union and managers to break the cycle of homophobia and transphobia which causes our colleagues pain, anguish and stress. There is still negativity around having a manager who is a woman or gay, as I found when I analysed data from the Scottish Government's cultural audit of Scottish FRSs when taking an academic qualification at the Adam Smith Institute, sponsored by the brigade. Prejudice is still out there.

We have champions and allies among straight colleagues and managers and other FBU sections have been very supportive. I think this is the way to get

the message across to all FBU members that all our colleagues deserve respect and dignity – whatever their gender, race or sexual orientation. I have never personally experienced harassment or discrimination, but then my story is perhaps not typical.

I didn't have a clue about my sexuality until ten years ago when I was nearly 30. I had quite a short journey over a year and a half coming to terms with things. I was very lucky that at the time I worked on a watch in Edinburgh with an old school friend, which made the whole thing slightly easier. I was nearly 30, a confident rugby-playing adult, worked in the building trade before joining the fire service and was quite well known in my home town. When I came out it was big news locally – for about five minutes.

My watch – all men – know who I am, what I stand for, my beliefs, what I will and won't tolerate and respect me for the kind of manager and colleague I am. They were happy to take part in the photo-shoot when I explained what it was for. Sexuality is important, but it's not the totally defining thing about human beings.

The experience of a shy gay teenager who had been bullied at school and just signed up as a firefighter could be very different. At the LGBT school in October last year, I was the only gay firefighter from Scotland, so decided I would play a more visible role which could encourage others and help spread the message that anti-gay attitudes are bad for everyone.

It was my first time at annual conference this year, and I was glad to second the motion on the need for more diversity education in the workplace. We need more FRSs to sign up to the Stonewall Diversity Challenge. Those who have realise there is both a moral and a business case for doing so. This year, three FRSs made the Stonewall top 100 employers.

There is a cost if someone feels they have to conceal their sexuality because the atmosphere at work is not inclusive. If people have to worry about hiding their sexuality – and others spend time and energy creating a negative, hostile atmosphere it's obviously harder for everyone to give 100 per cent at work and get on with the job.

Homophobia has no place in the FRS or the union. And lack of awareness should no longer be an excuse.



→ For more on Stonewall Diversity Champions and whether your brigade is a member, visit: www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1447.asp
→ More info on the G&L Committee: www.fbulgbt.org.uk

Working For You



ALAN ANDERSON

Brigade Chair and Safety Rep
Greater Manchester

FBU says get bodymapping

Every year the Greater Manchester Fire Service and the FBU run a health and safety roadshow for two weeks. This takes place around the same time as European Week of Health and Safety (19–25 October) which this year has the theme of occupational health.

So we thought we'd do 'bodymapping', an exercise that is being rolled out nationally by the FBU from 1 October. The FBU wants members and health and safety representatives to join in this nationwide initiative to find out how their work is hurting them and then raising those problems with their employer.

The 'bodymapping' method is a simple way of identifying health and safety problems at work that also shows the union in action.

The FBU is distributing a poster with an outline of a human body, both back and front, and stickers that participants can put on the body image where they say they hurt. The stickers come in different colours to represent different injuries such as pins and needles, muscle pain and shooting pains.

Workplaces should organise meetings where everyone is present and tell members to use the stickers indicating any health problems they are experiencing by putting them on the relevant part of the body on the body map.

When everyone is done, this will show areas where groups of people are being affected in a similar way and they can then try and work out why. This should also encourage participants to open up and talk to each other about problems they are experiencing.

If someone has a serious problem that no-one else is experiencing this should not be ignored but included in the debate. The meeting then agrees which items to prioritise so the safety rep can raise them with management and the safety committee.

This really is an excellent way of discovering people's workplace health problems and those they all experience together.

But this won't just have a local impact. At a national level the data will be collected and analysed and should help us achieve real benefits in health and safety for all members. I really welcome this initiative. All members and safety reps should get involved.

FBU TUBE
www.youtube.com/fbutube

**For more on the
bodymapping exercise**

Take control of your body

For general fitness and wellbeing, this exercise is suitable for all

PILATES

Because of the gentle and precise way in which exercises are performed, pilates is now endorsed by many medical specialists including physiotherapists, back specialists, osteopaths, GPs and surgeons.

Initially devised in the 1920s by physical trainer Joseph Pilates as a way to help injured athletes and dancers return to fitness, Pilates is a series of around 500 exercises inspired by yoga amongst other exercise disciplines. A non-aerobic form of exercise, it is suitable for most people and in particular those that need to improve flexibility and core muscle strength.

Who is Pilates for?

Pilates is for anyone wishing to improve their total fitness, posture and appearance but also:

- ◆ Chronic back pain sufferers
- ◆ Those recovering from injury
- ◆ RSI sufferers
- ◆ Professional sportspeople
- ◆ Performers (actors, dancers, musicians ...)
- ◆ First-time exercisers or those who have

BENEFITS OF PILATES

- ◆ A stronger, healthier back
- ◆ A more toned, mobile and flexible body
- ◆ A flatter stomach
- ◆ A better body shape
- ◆ Better posture
- ◆ A straighter spine
- ◆ Easier, fuller movement
- ◆ Better co-ordination
- ◆ Greater body awareness
- ◆ Injury prevention and rehabilitation
- ◆ Relief from stress
- ◆ General fitness
- ◆ A sense of calm and well-being

had a break from exercise

- ◆ The elderly
- ◆ Those wishing to prevent/combat osteoporosis
- ◆ Woman who are pregnant or have recently given birth.

There are two basic forms of Pilates: mat-based Pilates and equipment-based Pilates. Both are suitable to any level from beginner to advanced.

Mat-based Pilates, the most popular form, is a series of floor exercises that uses

gravity and your own body weight to provide resistance. It is usually undertaken in a group class or can be done at home as all that is needed is some floor space. The aim is to condition the deeper, supporting muscles of the body to improve posture, balance and co-ordination.

Equipment-based Pilates is undertaken in a studio on a one-to-one basis or in a small group with a qualified equipment-trained Pilates instructor. Using springs to create resistance, the three most popular pieces of equipment are the Reformer, the Cadillac and the Wunda Chair. Each piece of equipment targets specific body requirements – torso stability, postural alignment, strengthening abdominal muscles, developing spinal flexibility, strengthening the back and promoting balance and body control.

Pilates exercises are performed with a strong focus on proper breathing techniques, concentration and abdominal control. It is the quality and control of the posture which is important and not the number or speed of repetitions.

It is a safe, low impact form of exercise which uses all the muscles of the body to create better posture, improve body shape and give a general sense of well being.

There is a wide choice of books and DVDs available to use at home, though ideally a course of six to ten lessons with a qualified Pilates method teacher will ensure the basic postures and breathing techniques are fully understood to gain maximum benefit.

Pilates is a form of exercise suitable for people of all ages and levels of fitness. It is an ideal form of exercise for women during pregnancy and after childbirth. Pilates can alleviate stress on the spine, pelvis and joints caused by weight gain by strengthening the muscles around the spine and pelvis and improving posture as well as helping to strengthen the pelvic floor and abdominal muscles after childbirth.

As a gentle, low impact form of exercise, it is also very suitable for older people and historically, Pilates has proven effective in preventing and combating osteoporosis. For those with bad backs or injuries it may still be suitable and in many cases very helpful with recovery, depending on your condition. As with all new exercise regimes if in doubt seek medical advice.

➔ For more information on where to find a class near you try this website: www.bodycontrol.co.uk



Pilates with equipment

Faulty goods

Q I suffered a deep cut to my hand when a wine bottle shattered as I tried to pull the cork out. I had to have stitches and was off work as a result. I complained to the supermarket but they said it was not their responsibility and I should contact the manufacturer. Are they right?

A No. If the bottle did not meet the basic safety standards laid down in the Consumer Protection Act then you may well be able to pursue a compensation claim against the supermarket which sold it. The Act is there to protect members of the public against accidents caused by faulty goods. It is the responsibility of the retailer to ensure that the goods it sells in its stores are safe and fit for purpose.

Thompsons has secured compensation for two members of the public injured in similar circumstances. In both cases it was the supermarket that had to pay out.

Of course it may also be possible to claim from the manufacturer.

Faulty goods claims are easier to prove if the accident is recorded by the retailer in their accident book and if the receipt for the purchase is still available. Photographs of the faulty item and of the injury will also help.

Phone the FBU legal line as soon as possible because the sooner a solicitor can start working on a case and putting together the necessary evidence the better.

Small claims

Q What is the small claims court for? I'm owed money by a neighbour who agreed to share a bill for building repairs and is now refusing to pay.

A The small claims track of the County Court is designed to resolve straightforward disputes where the claim is worth less than £5,000 (unless it is for

personal injury, in which case the limit is £1,000).

The most common kind of disputes heard in the small claims court are neighbour disputes, consumer problems and housing repair issues. Because the small claims court does not pay claimants their legal costs (such as the costs of a solicitor), most people who use it are not legally represented.

Because of this, very complex claims that are worth less than £5,000 are sometimes excluded from the small claims court if the judge feels that the case is too involved for the small claims

procedure.

There are strict time limits for taking legal action. Claims for personal injury must normally be made within three years of the date of the accident whilst most consumer problems have a six-year time limit.

Just because your neighbour has, in your view, failed to keep their side of an agreement does not mean that you have a valid legal claim against them. So it's advisable to take legal advice. The FBU provides members with a free half hour of legal advice for non-work related problems.



SATOSHI KAMBAYASHI

Legal Beagle

Answers to some frequently asked legal questions that members put to the FBU

You should also ask yourself if you really need to go to court. There are plenty of free ways of sorting out disputes without resorting to court action.

The Court Service also runs an online system for lodging a small claim and recovering money owed, without the need to go to court. For more information go to: www.moneyclaim.gov.uk

Medical negligence

Q My wife had vision correction surgery at a private clinic. We think something must have gone wrong as her vision is now worse than it was before. Can we sue?

A If medical evidence shows that her vision has been damaged by laser eye surgery and that the clinic was negligent in how it carried out the procedure then she may have a clinical negligence claim against it.

According to the Royal College of Ophthalmologists problems with laser eye surgery arise in less than 5 per cent of cases. However when things go wrong, they can have dramatic consequences with the potential to lead to blindness.

In one such case the operator had not checked the settings on the machine and the burst was of too high an intensity, leading to permanent blindness in that eye. In that case the claimant recovered £25,000.

Your wife should see her GP as soon as possible in order to be referred to a specialist who can assess the damage.

Thompsons Solicitors has an expert clinical negligence unit and will be able to advise as to whether or not your wife has a valid claim for compensation.

→ The advice published here is not intended as legal advice on individual cases. With thanks to Thompsons solicitors.

‘Morris dancers are hard as nails’

Morris dancers are not all men, they don’t all wave hankies and their routines can be physically exhausting – Greater Manchester firefighter Jen Blacker explains

If you think Morris dancing is all men waving hankies with bells on their shins, think again. There are many varieties of Morris dancing, and Greater Manchester firefighter Jen Blacker is well placed to help you ditch a few misconceptions.

Jen plays the melodeon with Rivington, an all-woman group based in Bolton who have never been known to wave hankies. So, that’s two Morris myths quashed already: Morris is not a male-only zone and hankie-waving is optional.

There are self-proclaimed purists in the Morris Ring who believe women should not dance because it’s not traditional and they didn’t in the past. But they’ve got Morris history wrong, says Jen. Women have danced down the centuries and it would not be the first time the role of women has been marginalised by those who write the rules and the history. The Morris Federation to which Rivington is affiliated, and Open Morris, another grouping within the Morris movement, believe women’s contribution should be celebrated not snubbed.

Rivington was founded 30 years ago in Bolton and is very much part of the North West tradition. Clogs are worn and bells are threaded into shoelaces. Dancers are often accompanied by a number of musicians as they “dance out” or take to the streets. “We’ve got about 12 different dances,” says Jen, who taught herself to play the melodeon. The dances last between three and seven minutes. “It can be quite physically exhausting, especially if there’s a lot of high kicking. It’s quite skilled and our dancers put a lot into it,” she adds, agreeing that, put like that, the role of Morris musician can sound quite cushy in comparison.

Though there are some really old long-established teams, many were founded within the past 50 years. Rivington has many young dancers – there are no children dancing but young women can join at 16.

“When most people think of Morris dancing, they are probably thinking about



Jennifer with Rivington Morris outside the Old Man and Scythe in Bolton

PICTURES: PAUL HERRMANN



JEN BLACKER

In her working life Jen Blacker is a firefighter with Amber Watch at Stretford station near Manchester United's Old Trafford ground. She is also a self-taught melodeon player with the all-women Morris group Rivington.

the Cotswold tradition," says Jen. That's where the hankies come in and dancers also have bells strapped to their shoes. "Border teams based on traditions from the English/Welsh border, wear rag jackets, wave big sticks and tend to scream a lot. And in the North East tradition there are two sorts of sword dancing, including rapper dancing, where the swords are very thin and flexible and dancers weave in and out of each other flipping over swords. It can look very impressive"

North West dancers draw on the tradition of the mills for many of their dances – and many of the moves in the dances mimic the movements of mill machinery as material is spun and woven. The North West tradition is not just known for clogs with bells on – bobbins and small sticks with bells also feature as dancers go through the paces in Rivington, Ashton and Addlington and other dances named after local towns. There are local variations.

And, rather confusingly, there are teams dancing in the Cotswold tradition in various parts of the country – Hexham in the North East dances Cotswold – and Border teams dancing way beyond the borders.

Used to being in the minority

Though Rivington has only women dancers, when it comes to its musicians, men predominate. Until a few months ago, when Karen the fiddler joined Rivington, Jen was the only female musician. But as the only female firefighter on Amber Watch at Stretford fire station, close to Man U's ground at Old Trafford, she's used to being in the minority. "It's quite funny that even in a women's team I'm still with all the blokes being a musician not a dancer," she says as Rivington was preparing to head off to the Whitby Folk Festival.

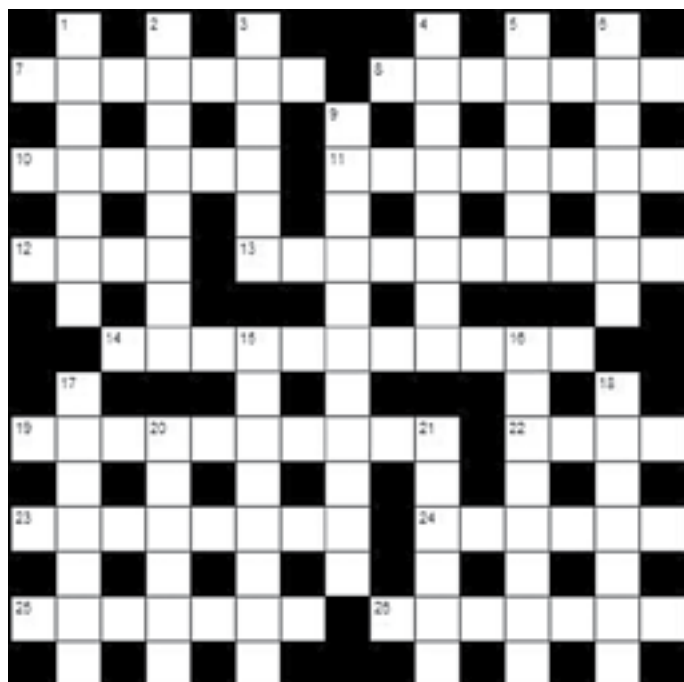
Gigs are more often at village fetes in the North West, or "dancing out" – such as outside the Old Scythe in Bolton. Usually, dancers stay in the same place as they go through their paces. But when Rivington takes part in the Longridge Procession near Preston, dancers and musicians are on the move. This, says Jen, brings new challenges. "We have to concentrate on not falling over, and if there's a good wind you sometimes can't hear what other musicians are playing. So it's important to have the drummer to keep the beat though clogs do make quite a racket on tarmac."

Snickering townie types can get a bit disrespectful when discussing Morris dancing – but, says Jen, that's their loss.

"It's lots of fun. I don't understand why it's got the reputation it has among some people who claim to be patriotic. It's a traditional English thing to do. Scottish and Irish people tend to embrace traditional dancing as part of their culture, but for some reason, many English people don't. It's all a bit baffling to me."

And Jen has a gentle word of advice for anyone who thinks it would be a good idea to mock a bunch of Morris dancers. "I wouldn't mess with them because you can't go round dressed like that and be a bit soft. Morris dancers are hard as nails." They also know how to have good clean fun – and keep English traditions alive – especially those progressive forces in the Morris world who give women who want to dance the chance to do so.

Quick Crossword



ACROSS

- 7** Winged horse of Greek mythology (7)
8 Appetiser; one who signals beginning of race (7)
10 Handgun, perhaps used by 8 (6)
11 Common climbing garden plant (8)
12 Anti-war 'anti-art' movement of early 20th century (4)
13 Small variety of marrow, zucchini to the Italians (10)
14 You have it in your hands! (11)
19 Place of higher education (10)
22 Small horse; £25 (4)
23 Something unexpected (8)
24 Destructive insect that feeds on stored grain (6)
25 Part of chair supporting upper limb (7)
26 Ate very well (7)

DOWN

- 1** Counting or currency system based on ten (7)
2 Brine-cured and seasoned brisket, bought from the deli counter (8)
3, 17 FBU called for one following fatal fire at Lakanal House (6,7)
4 Unity is... (8)
5 One who really should be in school (6)
6 Unit of sound measurement (7)
9 Looked very closely at (11)
15 Least tardy (8)
16 Strong black coffee (8)
17 See 3
18 Without help (7)
20 AKA adders (6)
21 Showed tiredness (or boredom) (6)



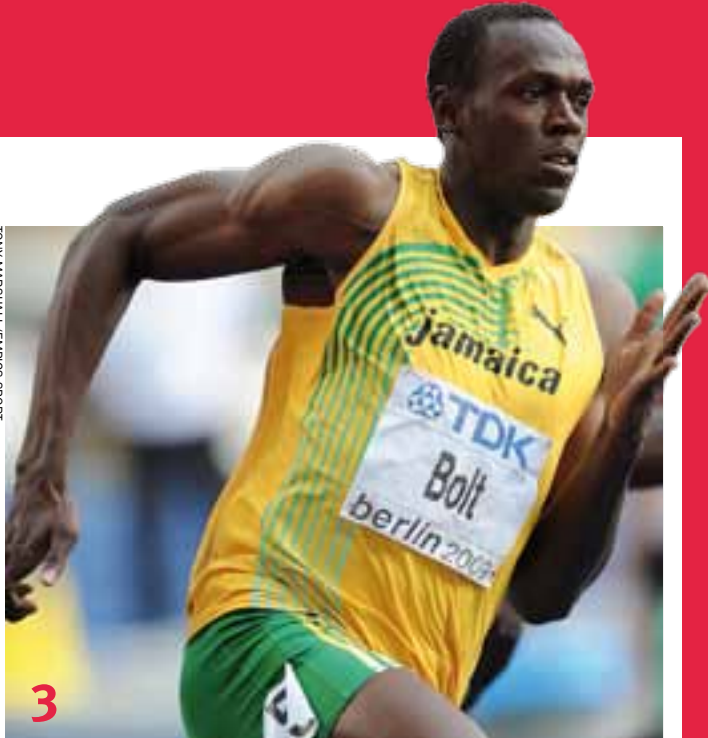
Solution to August/September 2009 crossword

Winner of the July Firefighter 2009 quiz
 Damian Griffiths of Bristol

Answers to August/September quiz

- 1. a – Jarrow**
2. b – 1984
3. c – Tolpuddle
4. c – Chainmaking
5. c – Margaret Thatcher

TONY MARSHALL/EMPIOS SPORT



Prize quiz

Win a Malibu Pilates Chair in this issue's health and fitness themed quiz



1. According to dietary guidelines, how many servings of fruit should we eat per day?

- a. 3
 b. 5
 c. 7
 d. 8

2. How many glasses of water should the average healthy adult drink per day?

- a. 10
 b. 8
 c. 15
 d. 6

3. Which of these types of exercise is 'anaerobic'?

- a. 100 metres sprint
 b. Going for a steady jog
 c. Doing a yoga class
 d. Going for a long bike ride

4. What is a healthy body-mass index (BMI) measurement?

- a. 18.5 or lower
 b. 18.5–24.9
 c. 25–29.9
 d. 30–34.9

5. When performing exercise what is the recommended type of food intake

- a. starchy carbohydrate food
 b. sugary drinks
 c. protein
 d. saturated fat



HOW TO ENTER

To win a Malibu Pilates Chair please send your answers to the Prize Quiz by 31 October 2009 on a postcard to: Prize Competition (October 2009) FBU Head Office, Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE. Include your name, address and membership number. The winner will be selected at random from all correct entries.





SAFER FIREFIGHTERS SAFER COMMUNITIES



**Defend our Fire Service
Rally and Lobby**

Wednesday 21 October 2009

**Central Hall Westminster,
Storey's Gate, London, SW1H 9NH**

followed by lobbying of MPs at the House of Commons



Please make sure your branch is represented

25-year badges



Ian Collinge (r) Kingsway, Derby, Green Watch receives his 25-year badge from **Chris Tapp, BMS Derbyshire**



Roger Long (l) Kingsway, Derby, Blue Watch receives his 25-year badge from **Chris Tapp, BMS Derbyshire**



Dave Ball (l) receives his 25-year badge from **Gavin Watson, branch chair, Hyndburn Fire Station, Accrington, Lancashire**



Mark Benstead (l) Green Watch, Moulton, Northamptonshire, receives his 25-year badge from **East Midlands regional chair Tom Murrays**



Mark Field (l) and Ken Hughes (centre) receive their 25-year badges from **Pardeep Raw, West Midlands membership secretary**



Billy Scott (r) Blue Watch, Tynemouth, Tyne and Wear brigade, receives his 25-year badge from **brigade vice chair Russ King**



Steve Wheeldon (l) and Mark Greaves (centre) receive their 25-year badges from **Mark Fellows, West Midlands chair**



Gary Edwards (l) receives his 25-year badge from **Rose Jones, West Midlands brigade secretary**



Chris Downes (l) Region 7 Secretary, receives his 25-year badge from **Rose Jones, West Midlands brigade secretary**



Dave Brierty, Warren Gee, Alf Barron, Mick Cant, Garry Dutton, Martin Ross, Alan Anderson, Tim Greenwood, Steve Shepard, Phil Daniels, Mick Lawler, Roy Higson, George Bouhslaw, Steve Birch, Mark Williams, Paul Neskes, Dave Ward, Peter Shaw (GMC) receive their 25-year badges from **FBU President Mick Shaw**

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Change of address or next of kin

Advise your Brigade Membership Secretary of any change of address and Head Office of changes to next of kin or nominations for benefits.

FBU FREEPHONE LEGAL ADVICE LINE

0808 100 6061

The line provides advice for **personal injury, family law, wills, conveyancing, personal finance and consumer issues.**

For disciplinary and employment-related queries contact your local FBU representative.

T THOMPSONS SOLICITORS