

FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE MATTERS

A PARLIAMENTARY BULLETIN FOR MPS FROM THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION | MARCH 2023



FIREFIGHTERS' PAY RESOLVED THROUGH COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Firefighters and control staff across the UK have overwhelmingly accepted a new pay deal to end their months-long dispute over pay. The result makes the fire and rescue service one of the few areas of the public sector to resolve its pay dispute without strike action. The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) believes collective bargaining was the key to this outcome.

BALLOT

On 6 March 2023, the FBU announced the results of a consultative ballot of its members after fire employers made a third offer in February. Some 96% of firefighters voted to accept the pay offer on an 84% turnout.

Matt Wrack, FBU general secretary said: "The overwhelming vote by FBU members to accept the improved offer means that the dispute is resolved on terms that are favourable to firefighters. We pay tribute to members of our union for their determination and unity throughout the past year. This result is testament to the power of collective action."

PAY OFFERS

The FBU and fire employers negotiate on pay and conditions through UK-wide collective bargaining arrangements, the National Joint Council (NJC). On 8 February 2023, after negotiations at the NJC, fire employers made a new offer to the FBU on basic pay, Continual Professional Development (CPD) and other important matters. The proposal included:

- A 7% increase in pay and CPD backdated to 1 July 2022
- A 5% increase in pay and CPD from 1 July 2023
- Mechanisms for discussion around retained firefighters, control, pay progression, CPD pay and future roles.

This was the offer put to FBU members.

On 27 June 2022, the fire employers offered only a 2% increase in pay and CPD from 1 July 2022. The FBU's executive council rejected this offer after consultations with members and began preparations for strike action.

On 4 October 2022, fire employers made a revised offer of 5% increase in pay and CPD from 1 July 2022. The FBU organised a consultative ballot of members on this offer. Firefighters voted overwhelmingly to against the new offer, with a 79% vote to reject with a ballot turnout of 78%.

BALLOT FOR STRIKE ACTION

On 5 December 2022, the FBU began a ballot of its members for strike action. The ballot closed on 30 January. Firefighters across the UK delivered a decisive mandate for strike action, with 88% voting Yes on a 73% turnout.

The overwhelming mandate for strike action was the crucial factor in moving fire employers to make the revised offer. Strikes are a last resort for firefighters. The FBU argued that responsibility for any disruption to services would lie squarely with fire service employers and government ministers.

FUNDING

The FBU also lobbied MPs for the funding necessary for a firefighters' pay rise. On 6 December 2022, thousands of firefighters rallied in central London and then met with politicians about their pay.

On 6 February 2023, the Westminster government confirmed a central funding (settlement funding assessment) increase for fire and rescue of almost 6% from April 2023 in England. This is the biggest increase for years.

Overall funding for fire and rescue, known as core spending power, consists of central funding and locally-raised revenue. Overall, local councils (including fire and rescue authorities) are getting 9% according to ministers. Many fire authorities and rescue also hold significant reserves.

Therefore fire employers and chief fire officers have no mandate to implement further job cuts and other austerity measures.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The FBU believes the key to the favourable resolution of this dispute is collective bargaining. The crucial mechanism for achieving this outcome was direct negotiations with fire and rescue service employers. With collective bargaining, the FBU was able to make its case and avoid industrial action.

This would not have been possible with a so-called "independent" pay review body. Workers in the NHS or teaching do not get direct negotiations on pay. They are subject to the deliberations of a pay review body and the whim of ministers. Under a pay review body, strike action would have been inevitable and the government needs to wake up to that fact.

However the FBU still faces attacks. Last May, ministers published a White Paper attacking the NJC and the FBU. This year they have proposed the draconian Minimum Service Levels Bill, to undermine the right to take even lawful industrial action. The FBU wants ministers to halt these attacks and concentrate on improving public services for our communities and the workforce.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

Matt Wrack added: "It's clear from this dispute that the organised power of trade unions, including being prepared to take strike action when necessary, can protect the pay and conditions of workers. At a time when the UK government is presiding over attacks on the wages of key workers in the NHS, teaching, rail and postal services, strikes are the first line of defence against those attacks on workers.

"The FBU stands in solidarity with each and every union on strike for decent pay. We will now step up our resistance against the outrageous and authoritarian law that the Tories have rushed through parliament to restrict the rights of working people to take strike action in defence of wages and jobs."



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