

The Trade Union Bill

A briefing for media and campaigning work



FIRE BRIGADES UNION

What does the Bill propose?

(NB Some of the following provisions will be implemented using other existing legislation)

A new 50% turnout requirement for all industrial action ballots.

An additional threshold in 'important public services' - including the fire service. This would require 40% of the entire workforce to vote Yes. This means that a union just meeting the first threshold would need a Yes vote of 80% for action to be lawful.

An increase from seven to fourteen days' notice that must be provided to employers for industrial action to take place.

Making unions give prior notice of their campaigning plans, their plans on social media, their plans to leaflet the public and their plans to include for example using megaphones on picket lines.

Allowing employers to use agency labour to break industrial action.

Further powers to the Certification Officer to investigate and impose sanctions on unions.

Making trade unions contribute to the running costs of the Certification Officer. These costs will also increase if the Bill goes through.

Industrial action ballots will be valid for four months only. Once this time period has lapsed, the ballot is seen as having no mandate and unions must re-ballot.

Further reductions on time off for trade union reps in the public sector.

A new requirement making unions appoint a picket supervisor who would have to wear an armband and have a letter of authorisation from their union to 'lead' the picket.

Making it compulsory for political funds to become 'opt-in' as opposed to 'opt-out'. This would affect unions' campaigning funds, including political donations.

The banning in the public sector of the use of 'check off' for collecting union subs.

(NB Check-off is a voluntary agreement between individual workers, unions and employers to take union subs direct from an employee's pay. Since unions pay employers for the provision there is no cost to the tax payer).

General Points

The Trade Union Bill is a major attempt to undermine workers' rights.

This Bill aims to prevent us from campaigning against bad employers and government policies. In the fire service those policies have put public safety at risk. This Trade Union Bill is undemocratic. Amnesty, Liberty and the British Institute of Human Rights have described it as an "attack on civil liberties".

The Conservatives were put into office with the support of just 24% of the electorate. Only 37% of those who voted backed them. Under their own proposed rules they wouldn't be in office.

Their flawed proposals are being rushed through parliament. Government are not consulting on a number of these proposals such as political funds, facility time, extending notice periods and ballots lapsing after four months.

They have offered limited opportunities for consultation in other areas. One response was limited to just 500 characters. We were given a tiny eight week window over the summer to respond..

Ballots

The proposal treats an abstention as a no vote, which is totally undemocratic.

Every FBU ballot since the onslaught of austerity attacks in 2010 have met both of these thresholds. We cannot be complacent however.

The key to increasing membership participation is solid workplace organisation, with representation in every workplace.

This Bill aims to undermine our ability to organise. Facility time is being slashed, check-off is being removed and trade unions are being asked to jump through unnecessary hoops. This all limits our ability to build a democratic organisation in the workplace.

Finance

The Bill aims to sabotage our finances, restricting our ability to launch campaigns.

The attack on check off is politically motivated. Public sector employers are now being told they must end voluntary agreements they have with trade unions.

If ballots lapse after four months, unions would then have to re-ballot their members to continue with the action. The costs of this are huge.

It is not right that government can dictate how long we run a campaign for. That is up to our members.

Trade Union money is members' money. Not content with attacking the pay and pensions of firefighters, this government now wants to dictate how workers' trade union money is spent.

Agency Workers

Agency workers were provided by AssetCo during the London shift dispute in 2010. During the strikes, FBU members abandoned picket lines to put out fires that untrained temporary staff were unable to deal with. AssetCo have since gone bankrupt.

Two FBU members were injured by fire engines driven by agency staff.

Under the proposals unions would need to overcome greater and greater obstacles before undertaking industrial action. If they did so employers would be allowed to use agency staff to undermine legal industrial action. In the fire service un-qualified agency workers would put public safety at risk.

Firefighters

Firefighters have been involved in a long dispute with the government over pensions. Firefighters did not want to take strike action but were forced to. Those strikes could have been avoided had the government not attacked pensions, making us pay more, work longer and get less

Key Points

We cannot and will not accept the Trade Union Bill. The fault for industrial disputes is with employers and government, not unions. They are the ones attacking us.

We regularly consult our members through our democratic structures. Members of the Fire Brigades Union drive the policies and campaigns of the union.

The government is pitching this as an attack on 'trade union barons', the reality is, it is an attack on every working person in the UK.

This Bill is part of the hollowing out of democracy. They know trade unions are the first line of resistance. The government wants to insulate themselves and their friends from any kind of protest.