

THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION (LONDON REGION)



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To: All London FBU members

Dear Brothers and Sisters

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN THE LONDON FIRE BRIGADE

At recent meetings of the FBU's London Regional Committee (LRC), local delegates have raised concerns over a number of issues which are having an increasingly negative impact on our members.

It is becoming more and more clear to the union that good industrial relations in the London Fire Brigade are being compromised by the brigade's needlessly dogmatic and unbending approach in a wide range of areas.

With this in mind, the LRC agreed to initiate a wide-ranging consultation exercise among local branches, so we might further gauge opinion from members.

To facilitate these discussions, I will outline here the particular areas of concern.

Following the conclusion of the 2002-04 national pay dispute, we went through a long period which saw very little formal dialogue take place locally between senior managers and union representatives.

To address this, local FBU officials have, in recent times, attempted to adopt a different, and improved, style of working with senior managers, one which seeks to promote constructive negotiations and avoid confrontation, and which pays particular attention to National Joint Council (NJC) protocols on enhanced industrial relations which were agreed by the FBU and national fire and rescue service employers in 2007.

Regrettably, though, it has become clear to us that senior London Fire Brigade managers and heads of department have no desire to reciprocate our sensible and moderate approach, instead adopting a strategy that time and again seeks to drive through change with little or no regard for the views of the workforce.

Whilst we have been prepared to work together with senior managers to reach agreement through compromise, those same managers too often see consultation as little more than a bureaucratic tick-box exercise. New initiatives and changes to policy are dreamed-up seemingly without any kind of justification, and then imposed with scant regard for the consequences.

The FBU is no longer prepared to accept change for change's sake.

Morale on stations is already at an all-time low, with many members feeling undervalued by their employer, even though those members have, in recent years, done everything that has been asked of them, such as undertaking a whole raft of new working practices and showing considerable goodwill in the name of delivering 'modernisation'.

FBU officials and members are not afraid of change. On the contrary, where it brings about better conditions, a safer system of work and an improved service, we welcome it. But this is not the kind of change that our employers want. Their interpretation of modernisation is a culture of change that detrimentally affects members' working conditions and compromises the efficiency of the service, usually in the interests of saving money.

Below is a list of issues that the FBU in London has been attempting to resolve. These topics should form part of the discussions at branches.

SUBSISTENCE

Since the introduction of a new subsistence policy, we have been challenging the non-payment to members of claims for subsistence where the event took place within five miles (as the crow flies) of the base posting. There is no justification for this restrictive stipulation. Senior managers originally claimed that guidance from the tax office was responsible, but, when challenged, they admitted that tax rules did not prevent their making these payments. The brigade's actions are in flagrant breach of the Grey Book. The FBU has demanded that those individuals who have had claims rejected now receive full reimbursement. In response, managers have offered to pay just £4.00 per day to all those who have been short-changed, with the attached condition that the union accept the five-mile clause from now on.

CPD

In 2007, the FBU agreed locally the concept of a CPD interim process. Where they had accrued fewer than nine days' non-due-to-service sickness in the previous year, London members were able to access payment via the streamlined local interim process, rather than be required to enter the more complex national process. Now, though, and completely unnecessarily, senior managers have demanded a reduction in the number of sick days to eight, arguing that the welcomed reduction in sickness levels throughout the brigade provides scope for this. The FBU argued that members were therefore effectively being punished for improving sickness levels generally. Perversely, the brigade responded by offering a 'compromise' which would alter the number of days from eight in a year to 21 days in three years, which any keen observer would quickly discover is, pro-rata, an even more inferior proposal. It would also fall foul of the national CPD agreement, which provides for annual, and not *triennial*, assessments.

STATION ACCOMMODATION AND CATERING FACILITIES

Station accommodation has been subjected to a brigade-wide audit, often resulting in the removal of personal belongings. The brigade maintains, rather inflexibly, that, as a fire station is a workplace, there is no place for the keeping of personal belongings anywhere other than in personal lockers. This approach gives no regard for the welfare of members, who spend long hours at stations and often work under extreme stress and pressure. Further, LFEPA is now forcing through its latest version of the Asset Management Plan (AMP), a retrograde policy which seeks to scrap privacy-for-all and will do nothing to support women firefighters and help to develop a diverse workforce. Managers have constantly ignored FBU arguments that privacy-for-all would better advance their objectives in these areas. They have also ignored our concerns about the excessive cost and poor quality of works carried out on

stations. Included in the AMP is a new station design brief which makes provision for the removal of cookers from kitchens, to be replaced with combination microwave ovens. It is clear that the brigade does not recognise the need for firefighters to eat healthy, cooked meals. Managers maintain that members should bring in their own food, to be cooked individually in the small microwave ovens, with the added problem this brings of not being able to prepare, cook or even eat within the allotted time.

LEAVE

Additional leave is granted very infrequently, even in the winter months. The brigade has imposed a detrimental leave policy which does not allow members to book scale 'B' leave more than 28 days in advance. Also, firefighters can no longer act up to permit crew and watch managers to take leave, and two officers are prohibited from taking leave at the same time. These arrangements have a detrimental effect on the ability of members to take leave, especially those managers whose leave is now subject to two rota systems.

MIDDLE MANAGERS

Middle managers have faced attacks over the use of brigade facilities for the purpose of camping out. The brigade is attempting to reverse a decades-long protocol for camping-out, which would force many middle managers to move home or use their own money to pay for temporary accommodation. These members face other attacks on their conditions, pensions and shift pattern.

SHIFTS

Discussions over proposed new working patterns (12-hour shifts) have not taken place since early 2008, and now the brigade has circulated emails instructing station managers to organise watch meetings on the subject, in what will undoubtedly be a concerted attempt to convince members of the virtues of new shifts. The FBU remains utterly opposed to 12-hour shifts, and we are very well-placed, both legally and industrially, to resist their introduction.

LONDON WEIGHTING ALLOWANCE (LWA)

The FBU attempted to secure a decent negotiated increase on LWA for 2008-09, but our entirely reasonable proposals were dismissed. Instead, a rather derisory increase of 2.45% was imposed, with the justification that this figure was identical to the NJC pay award. As the union pointed out to senior managers, LWA should be a *locally*-agreed payment, without linkage to any national pay award.

TARGETED-CALLING

The brigade's policy on targeted-calling has been routinely abused by managers. Some have utilised the tactic of targeted-calling simply to help meet local HFSV targets and others when it is clearly not the 'final option'. Both examples represent a flagrant breach of the policy on targeted-calling. There has also been a distinct lack of consultation with local FBU reps over targeted-calling exercises.

BUDGET, PHOTOGRAPHERS AND BULK WATER CARRIERS

LFEP ignored FBU concerns over cuts to the budget, which included the scrapping of brigade photographer posts, a role which will we now be forced onto fire investigation officers. Further, managers have agreed to introduce new bulk water carriers that will not be crewed by uniformed members of staff, instead opting to have the appliances delivered to incidents by employees of AssetCo. (Additional advice on this latter issue will be circulated to members at the appropriate time.)

DEPUTY ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER (DAC) ROLE

In 2007-08, the brigade introduced the new role of DAC. Such a role is outside of the agreed role structure for the fire and rescue service and is not recognised by the Grey Book. While several then Area Managers (AMs) accepted the new arrangement – a move which also necessitated their withdrawal from the FBU – not all did. Those who remained in the AM role have subsequently been subjected to threats to remove their AM status and reduce them in role if they do not accept conversion to the role of DAC.

DUE-TO-SERVICE ABSENCE AND LIGHT DUTIES

Members who are injured on duty are now finding that their sickness absence has been recorded as *non*-due-to-service by the brigade, with many being forced to return to work under threat of being placed on half or nil pay. Further, when members are returning from long-term sickness absence, they are often subject to a new light duties policy which reduces their wages by 20%, even where their recovery and return to work has been hindered by brigade delays in organising medical appointments and case meetings.

DRUG AND ALCOHOL POLICY

We have seen, in potential breach of members' contracts, the proposed imposition of a draconian drug and alcohol policy, which is even more restrictive than the legal limit for drink-driving and makes provision for random testing, despite their being no history of widespread drug- or alcohol-related problems in the London Fire Brigade.

GRIEVANCE AND DISCIPLINE

Members are now facing unacceptable delays in having formal grievances heard, as well as a more authoritarian approach by the brigade in the discipline arena, a fact reflected by the increase in the number of disciplinary hearings taking place.

TARGET CULTURE

More and more targets, which are unrealistic and unachievable, are being routinely imposed on staff, along with threats of managerial action in the event that those targets are not met.

The above should not be seen as an exhaustive list, but simply as an aide to encourage and enhance debate on stations.

The FBU has made it clear to senior managers that morale on stations is now at its lowest. Core skill levels have also taken a disturbing dip, a consequence of the brigade's disproportionate focus on diversory activities. Instead of addressing these concerns, senior managers seem intent on adding to the problems.

Senior managers and politicians alike maintain that legislation and the current economic climate are responsible for the need to change, but this is mere propaganda. Many of the problems we have described have been around long before the current economic difficulties came about. And while legislation may place certain responsibilities on fire authorities, how that legislation is interpreted and acted upon is a matter for the individual authority.

The FBU's London regional office receives calls daily from members unhappy about how they are being treated. For many, the role of firefighter has traditionally been one of which to be proud, hence it is very sad to note how many members appear so keen these days to reach the point of retirement as a means to escape their treatment at the hands of those managers within the brigade who are responsible for the current oppressive atmosphere.

We believe that the time has now come to say enough is enough, to say no to change for change's sake. The FBU has tried to be reasonable. We have tried to reach agreement where

we can. We have tried to work in partnership. But, despite these efforts, we have not managed to alter the uncompromising approach of those who run the brigade.

It is now down to us all to stand together if we wish to bring about a true cultural change, and one which focuses the minds of our employers.

I would urge all members to read and discuss the contents of this letter, and to make their own judgments as to which type of service they wish to work for: one which values their work and rewards them accordingly, or one which increasingly treats them with contempt and ignores their concerns.

The choice for senior managers and heads of department is stark: *forward in partnership and mutual respect with the FBU or backwards in perpetual conflict and the threat of industrial strife?*

Yours fraternally

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For and on behalf of the London Regional Committee