

NEWS REPORT



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COLEMAN SPARKS NEW BUST-UP OVER BEDS

Chairman overrules managers and rips-up agreement with FBU

A ROW HAS broken out in the London Fire Brigade after Brian Coleman, the Conservative chairman of the fire authority, ordered senior managers to renege on a deal with the FBU by banning beds from the new Harold Hill fire station and replacing them with reclining chairs.

Coleman's intervention has stoked flames of anger among FBU members, especially those posted to the new station, many of whom now feel they agreed to transfer under false pretences.

FBU officials have condemned Coleman, arguing that he has ridden roughshod over a deal struck between the two sides last year, following a trial of the recliners at Wallington fire station.

That trial resulted in a number of firefighters reporting injuries, after it became apparent that the recliners could not be used for any length of time without the user feeling discomfort. A report by the Health and Safety Executive also concluded that the chairs were not designed to be used for a seven-hour stand-down period, and managers were forced to scrap plans to roll them out.

The FBU and brigade then struck a deal which would have seen beds remain in place until such time that a new

supplier was able to provide what were termed 'horizontal resting platforms' manufactured to a specification which met the health and safety criteria agreed by the two sides.



'ZZZZZZZ': Coleman leads by example

The process of inviting tenders for the supply of the equipment is yet to begin. Despite—or, perhaps, because of—this, Coleman has insisted that the unsafe recliners be placed on-the-run at Harold Hill.

The brigade now stands accused of instructing employees to use equipment which senior managers and the Health and Safety Executive have already agreed is not fit for purpose, and the FBU has issued advice to all members not to comply with any order to use the recliners.

The union's health and safety coordinator, Gordon Fielden, said today, 'The brigade is showing a flagrant disregard for proper industrial relations, as well as the well-being of its workforce,

by walking away from a negotiated agreement that sought to safeguard employees from injury. It is astonishing that they are placing themselves at risk of a legal action by so contemptuously ignoring clear advice from the Health and Safety Executive on this issue.

'If industrial relations are to mean anything, we must be able to be sure that the brigade sticks to an agreement when it reaches one.

Firefighters work 30 hours out of 39, spread over two nights, and it is not unreasonable that they be given facilities that allow them to recover from some of the demanding physical challenges that sometimes confront them,' added Gordon.

'That Councillor Coleman is prepared to place his employees at risk in pursuit of his own political agenda is shocking. It is a great shame that not a single senior officer seems to have the courage to challenge him, even though many of them criticise him in private.

'Ironically, last week, the brigade called a meeting with the union to discuss ways of improving industrial relations. Not a day later, they walked away from a joint agreement on recliners.

'We continue to pursue this matter vigorously. Meanwhile, we strongly advise members not to use the unsafe equipment.'