

NEWS REPORT



Fire Brigades Union (London Region), John Horner Mews, Frome Street, LONDON N1 8PB. Tel: 020-7359 3638

Four hundred protesting firefighters with a single message for Boris Johnson, Brian Coleman and Ron Dobson:

NO CHANGE IS NOT AN OPTION!

Brigade bosses rocked by explosive demonstration

A N ARMY OF London firefighters descended on the new Harold Hill fire station last Thursday to join a Fire Brigades Union (FBU) demonstration that had been called in protest at attacks to working conditions.

The protest coincided with the official opening of the station.

Politicians and dignitaries—including the mayor of London, Boris Johnson, the head of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), Brian Coleman, and the London Fire Brigade commissioner, Ron Dobson—arrived to a barrage of hostility and catcalls from over 400 firefighters. Johnson and Coleman in particular looked genuinely stunned at the scale of the demonstration.

FBU members are furious at attempts by fire authority managers to introduce a detrimental new shift pattern and to force firefighters to use new resting facilities which have been declared unsafe by the Health and Safety Laboratory.

The union is also angry at the politically-motivated suspension from duties of a key official, moves by Brian Coleman to dismantle the existing negotiating

machinery, and the decision to use £12m of taxpayers' money to raise a private, strikebreaking workforce.

Though the demonstration was peaceable and civilised, proceedings inside the building were heavily disrupted, owing simply to the level of noise from outside. When making his speech to invited guests and the assembled media, Boris Johnson struggled to be heard above the din from the protest.

Firefighters chanted "Coleman Out", while whistles blew and klaxons blared. Placards displaying the slogans "Coleman Must Go", "Defend Our Shift System" and "No Witch-hunt of Union Officials" were held aloft.



© Tim Hoy

The union's executive council member for London, Ian Leahair, was cheered to the rafters when he told protesters that Coleman was heaping disrepute on the service and should be removed from office by Boris Johnson. Brother Leahair also warned bosses that any attempt to impose unwelcome changes to shifts would be met with a ballot for industrial action.



© Hugh Hill

At the end of the ceremony, Johnson and Coleman tried to make a secret getaway via a side exit, chaperoned by around half a dozen senior officers and a handful of police and security guards. However, their plan was foiled when they were spotted by some eagle-eyed protestors, who made sure the pair did not escape without experiencing the raw fury of the assembled hordes. There was resentment that, rather than come out and speak directly to their workforce—some of whom had travelled considerable distances—Johnson and Coleman tried instead to scurry away unnoticed.



© Hugh Hill

Commissioner Dobson, to his credit, then agreed to address the protest through a loudhailer. He told demonstrators that he had certainly heard them loud and clear, though he thought they were going about things the wrong way. To heckles, he defended the authority's line on shift changes and other alterations to working conditions.

The BBC led with coverage of the protest throughout the day on local news bulletins. Other media organisations, including ITN, also gave prominence to

the event.

London FBU regional official Laurie Brightman said afterwards: "In over 26 years' service, it was one of the most powerful and vibrant demonstrations I have ever seen. Members travelled from all over London to be at Harold Hill. I think Boris Johnson and Brian Coleman were truly shocked by the level of anger and frustration among our people."

FBU members had a message for their bosses, warned Brother Brightman. "When it comes to shifts, fire authority leaders are constantly saying that no change is not an option. Well, the FBU is also saying that no change is not an option. No change to the dogmatic and ill-thought out plot to introduce 12-hour shifts is not an option. No change to forcing our members to use unsafe

resting facilities is not an option. No change to the head of the fire authority dragging the reputation of our service through the mud is not an option. No change to militant principal managers and publicity-seeking politicians ignoring the concerns of our members is not an option. No change to the policy of imposition rather than negotiation is not an option. We've heard our employers recite the mantra a lot. Well, now we are saying it back to them: 'No change is not an option,' and the sooner they get that message the better."



© Tim Hoy

An emergency meeting of the FBU's London regional committee took place immediately after the protest. At that meeting, delegates voted unanimously to send a motion back to branches that called for a ballot for industrial action in response to attacks to conditions of service.

All London members will be asked to vote on the motion at branch meetings during the coming weeks.

Regrettably, the stage seems set for a full-scale industrial battle. It is one that the FBU neither sought nor asked for. But, since the gauntlet has been thrown down by Boris Johnson and Brian Coleman, the union is urging members to rally to the cause. No change is not an option.

IT'S TIME TO UNITE AND FIGHT!