

NEWS REPORT



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Coleman 'sacked' from NJC...Disgraced councillor resigns minutes after voting through budget...Bullying allegations swept under the carpet...Industrial action imminent...Suspensions, freemasonry, expenses scandals, censorship and police investigations...

WHY THIS BASKET CASE OF AN AUTHORITY IS NOT FIT TO RUN THE WORLD'S FINEST FIRE SERVICE

THE REPUTATION OF the London Fire Brigade is being dragged through the mud. The authority which runs our service has become a freakshow. Its standing could not descend any lower, and the people—our members—who go to work every day to do their best for the people of London are sick and tired of the degenerate behaviour of their political bosses. Enough is enough.'

Those were the damning words, spoken last night, of FBU regional secretary Joe MacVeigh, after 48 hours of controversy, during which the reputation of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) sunk to a new low.

A meeting of the authority at Union Street descended into chaos after the chair, Brian Coleman, threw out media crews and ruled there would be no debate on the controversy surrounding his disgraced deputy and Tory party ally Bertha Joseph.

The furore came 24 hours after Coleman himself was apparently unceremoniously booted out of his post as chair of the employers' side of the National Joint Council (NJC), the body through which all matters relating to the pay and conditions of UK firefighters are negotiated. The *Local*

Government Chronicle reported how Coleman's NJC colleagues—fellow fire authority members from around the country—became increasingly exasperated at his conduct and manoeuvred to have him removed. 'There are multiple concerns about Brian Coleman's behaviour in a range of different circumstances,' a senior Local Government Association (LGA) source told the newspaper.

At a meeting of the NJC on Tuesday, the acting chair apologised unreservedly for the conduct of Coleman at a previous meeting, and gave an assurance that things would be different in future.

'This case isn't an isolated incident; it is repeated bad behaviour,' added the LGA source.

Meanwhile, at yesterday's LFEPA meeting, Councillor Joseph was still in place, despite having been banned from operating as a councillor for six months—and also subjected



LIABILITY: Brian Coleman

to a police investigation—after being found guilty of financial impropriety for using money intended for children’s charities to buy expensive clothing for herself.

The Liberal Democrats on the authority stormed out in protest at Coleman’s rulings over the media and Joseph, accusing Coleman and his Tory colleagues of ‘trying to hide away from an embarrassing truth’ and ‘stifling debate’.

The mayor of London, Boris Johnson, recently wrote to Joseph, demanding an explanation of her actions within 14 days. Rather suspiciously, that deadline expired yesterday—the day of the authority meeting.

The FBU had argued that, once Joseph had been found guilty and banned from her role as a local councillor, Johnson should have sacked her from the fire authority immediately, as was his right. The 14-day deadline appeared to have been little more than a contrived attempt to ensure that Joseph remained in role until yesterday’s meeting, where she had the casting vote over Johnson’s own controversial fire brigade budget, which, if approved, would see a loss in a number of uniformed posts as well as other cutbacks. It was widely expected that, once Johnson’s budget was ratified, Joseph

would go. And, sure enough, within minutes of the meeting concluding, Joseph resigned.

The row provided the centre-piece for local television news bulletins, and the blogosphere was abuzz with talk of sleaze and political corruption.

On behalf of the FBU, Joe MacVeigh added, ‘Once she had gone, the mayor argued that the case against Joseph was “compelling”. Well, if that was the case, why didn’t he sack her



DISGRACED: *Bertha Joseph*

weeks ago? Why did he allow her to take part in an authority meeting at which she had the casting vote over a budget which involved half a billion pounds of taxpayers’ money? To be blunt, we all know the answer to the question. It was because the mayor put narrow political considerations before what was morally right.

‘This whole sordid affair tells us everything we need to know about Boris Johnson, Brian Coleman and their contempt for our service. They use the fire authority as a political tool to advance their own agendas. In doing so, they have heaped shame on LFEPA and themselves.’

The scandal over Bertha Joseph followed hot on the heels of the controversy surrounding her fellow Tory councillor Betty Evans-Jacas, who last autumn defected from the Labour party and in doing so handed Brian Coleman a single-vote working majority on the fire authority. Evans-Jacas refused to step down and fight a by-election as a Tory candidate, despite her new party having been demolished at the polls when she was elected by a large majority on a Labour ticket in her local borough.

In a further twist, the FBU can reveal that two complaints over separate allegations of bullying by Brian Coleman have

been rejected. The first, regarding an alleged verbal assault of a young canteen worker at Union Street, was ruled not to be worthy of further action; and the second, relating to an outburst in which Coleman labelled a political opponent an ‘odious toad’ in a meeting, was considered not to be a breach of the code of conduct, despite the code stipulating that those whom it covers must at all times treat others with ‘respect’.

These outcomes were in stark contrast to what would have been the reaction had a firefighter been accused of such behaviour, and once more gives the impression of Coleman not being subjected to the same rules as everyone else.

There is also anger at Coleman’s escaping of any sanction following repeated scandals over his excessive expenses claims.

These recent controversies come at a time when the FBU is gearing its members up for industrial action over what it has described as a ‘complete breakdown in industrial relations’.

The union is frustrated at the brigade’s dogmatic and ill-thought out plans for 12-hour shifts, as well as the renegeing by brigade managers on an agreement not to introduce resting facilities that had been ruled unfit for purpose by the Health and Safety Laboratory.

UNION MEMBERS are also angry at the treatment of senior negotiator Paul Embery, who has been suspended for the last eight weeks following a row with Brian Coleman at January’s fire authority meeting.

Joe MacVeigh summed up the mood. ‘The patience of our members has snapped. The fire authority is a circus. Brian Coleman and his Tory freemason colleagues are wreaking havoc on the reputation of the London Fire Brigade, as well as attacking our conditions of service with impunity and attempting to dismantle the brigade’s industrial relations machinery.’

‘The time has come for us to fight back. His colleagues on the NJC had the good sense to dump Coleman, and Boris Johnson should do the same for London.’

‘While our members are bemused and angry by the latest antics of Councillor Coleman, our responsibility is to ensure that our members’ voices are heard, so it is with this in mind that we are looking to meet authority members with a view to bridging our differences. We accept entirely that our members expect us to negotiate properly and try to settle differences with the brigade amicably, and we will do everything in our power to try to avert the need for industrial action.’



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