

## NEWS REPORT



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# STAGE SET FOR INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE AS BRIGADE WALKS OUT OF SHIFTS TALKS

FBU condemns bosses' "deeply irresponsible" withdrawal

**T**HE FIRE BRIGADES Union (FBU) has condemned London Fire Brigade bosses for boycotting crucial negotiations over proposals to introduce new working patterns.

In a move which is likely to dramatically increase the chances of a serious industrial dispute, the brigade's head of human resources, James Dalgleish, has formally notified the FBU that principal managers are to pull out of face-to-face meetings with union officials.

The FBU immediately condemned the move as "deeply irresponsible" and said that, as well as potentially breaching employment legislation, the brigade's refusal to negotiate on its proposals will lead to even more ill-feeling among the workforce and bring forward the prospect of industrial action.

The brigade has been trying for four and a half years to introduce 12-hour shifts, which, says the union, will pave the way for cuts in fire cover and job losses. The recent exposure of a secret document, which spelled out in detail how these cuts could be achieved, and which was intended

only for the eyes of the most senior brigade figures, threw the brigade onto the back foot and vindicated the union's claims. In response, the brigade denied there were any plans to use new shifts as an opportunity to force through cuts, and insisted it was seeking a collective agreement with the union. But, in a dramatic u-turn, the brigade has now walked away from the negotiating table, and the stage looks set for conflict.

**S**PEAKING THIS morning, the union's regional secretary, Joe MacVeigh, blasted principal managers and suggested they were never really serious about reaching a negotiated agreement. "Winston Churchill once said that 'jaw-jaw' was better than 'war-war', but what has happened is disgraceful and an insult to London's 6,000 firefighters," said Joe. "Here we are, at a crucial stage in the discussions over proposed new shifts, and the brigade has thrown a hand grenade into the proceedings. It now looks as though they will try to impose new shifts without agreement. If they do that, they will have a full-

scale industrial dispute on their hands.”

Joe said that the brigade had walked away from the talks on the flimsiest of pretexts. “The commissioner, on his round of meetings designed to sell 12-hour shifts to the workforce, has suggested that the FBU is refusing to attend talks. This is utterly untrue. Indeed, dates for meetings had been proposed and were on the brink of being agreed by both sides. But then the brigade refused to attend because they objected to the inclusion of Paul Embery in the union’s negotiating team. Paul is a senior FBU official who has been a key negotiator on shifts for the last four years. In what was an excessive and unnecessary move by the brigade, Paul was suspended from duty and charged with gross misconduct after standing up to the chair of the fire authority, Brian Coleman, at a meeting in January. He remains suspended to this day.

“We explained that, regardless of his suspension, Paul remained an elected official of the union and employee of the brigade, thereby meeting the criteria necessary to represent the FBU in talks. We even offered to meet away from brigade premises in the evening or at a weekend to facilitate talks, but the brigade refused. They said they would only attend if Paul was shunted off into a side room and prevented from meeting principal managers face-to-face. What an insult. There is no way that any self-respecting union could allow an employer to dictate what the make-up of its negotiating team should be for such crucial discussions. It is for our members, not the brigade, to choose who represents them. It would be as unacceptable as the union trying to dictate who is fit to sit on the brigade’s side of the table.

“Paul has been attending talks on shifts for four years, and it would clearly be massively detrimental to FBU members to have him removed at this

critical stage.

Joe expressed suspicion at the timing of the latest developments. “Is it any surprise that this has all happened at this point in the proceedings?” he asked. “You really have to wonder what the brigade’s agenda is and whether Paul’s suspension and their refusal to talk are politically-motivated. I think the brigade’s actions are proof that they were never really serious about negotiating an agreement. Brian Coleman has never been one for consensus, and I don’t think he is about to change his spots now.”

**E**VEN SO, Joe urged the brigade to drop its boycott and resume negotiations. “A negotiated settlement can still be achieved, but there is a sensible way, and there is a non-sensible way. The sensible way is for the brigade to drop its boycott and accept the union’s invitation to meet. We can then thrash the issue out in a calm, level-headed manner and avert the need for an industrial dispute. The non-sensible way is for the brigade to dig its heels in and try to force through changes to shifts without agreement. If they take this route, we will meet them head-on. We will ballot our members for industrial action, and a full-scale dispute will ensue. The brigade should be under no illusion about just how determined we are to fight unwelcome shift changes.

“I urge the commissioner and his advisors to see reason and allow talks to resume with whomever each side wishes to attend.”



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