

NEWS REPORT



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IT'S TIME TO UNITE AND FIGHT AGAINST 12-HOUR SHIFTS!

Union calls on firefighters to join lobby of LFEPA meeting

THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION (FBU) is calling on its members to support a protest lobby of the next meeting of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), at which politicians, led by controversial authority chief Brian Coleman, are expected to plan their next step in the assault on firefighters' working patterns.

The meeting is scheduled for 24 June at the London Fire Brigade's Union Street headquarters, and firefighters are being urged to attend from 1230 hours in uniform and with whistles to make their feelings heard. A list of prominent platform speakers has been drawn-up.

The protest became inevitable after brigade bosses boycotted a series of meetings called to discuss the proposed changes. The two sides have not met since last year, owing to a dogged insistence by the brigade that it be allowed to pick and choose members of the FBU's negotiating team.

When the union asserted its right to select its own negotiators, the brigade walked away from the negotiating table and collapsed the entire process.

Union leaders condemned the move, and accused bosses of never being serious about reaching a

collective agreement in the first place.

Now the union is urging a show of force for 24 June, so that the commissioner, Ron Dobson, and fire authority politicians are left in no doubt as to the strength of feeling on the issue.

There is likely to be more fireworks inside the meeting room, over an attempt by the mayor of London, Boris Johnson, to maintain a Brian Coleman-led Conservative majority on the authority, by rewriting the rules which govern the allocation of seats to political parties, a move which the union described as "blatant gerrymandering".

FBU leaders have argued that 12-hour shifts would wreak havoc on members' domestic lives, as well as pave the way for cuts in night-time fire cover and reductions in establishment levels. By way of evidence, they point to comments made by the deputy commissioner Rita Dexter, who, when the proposals were first announced, said that 12-hour shifts would be "future-proofed" for making cuts. The union also cites the exposure of a top-secret document, which revealed how authority managers were drawing-up confidential plans for using new shifts as an opportunity to reduce the available number of appliances during the night shift.

In an attempt to win the propaganda war on shifts,

the brigade has appointed a former political spin doctor—Richard Stokoe—as its head of communications. Stokoe will draw close to a six-figure salary and preside over a vast department of 37 employees.

A recent initiative saw the creation of the “Commissioner’s Blog”, which encouraged firefighters to publicly contribute to the discussion on shift changes. But it quickly became clear that there was virtually no support for the proposals, and brigade bosses have been left struggling to justify the march towards change.

This hardly comes as a surprise, says the union. In an independent consultative ballot, a massive 98% of FBU members voted against shift change proposals. Despite this resounding response, the brigade has ploughed-on regardless, and the union says it will explore every avenue—legal and industrial—to prevent the introduction of unwelcome change.

BRIGADE bosses have been accused of misleading the workforce by attempting to give the impression that they are entitled to alter firefighters’ existing contracts without agreement. In fact, such a move would almost certainly represent a fundamental breach of contract, leaving the brigade open to widespread legal claims.

In an attempt to get round this problem, the brigade is said to be considering *terminating* existing contracts—in other words, sacking every firefighter in London—and inviting them to rejoin on new, inferior contracts with revised shift patterns written in.

Indeed, it is this latter option which may form part of the discussions at the authority meeting on 24 June.

However, even this strategy would prove problematic for the brigade. The union would instantly lodge claims for unfair dismissal, and a ballot for industrial action—up to and including strike action—would be inevitable.

The row over the brigade’s boycott of meetings centred around the decision in January to suspend senior union negotiator Paul Embery from duty, following his involvement in an altercation with Brian Coleman. The brigade used Paul’s suspension as an excuse not to attend any talks where he would have been involved, in spite of the fact that Paul remained an employee of the brigade and the chosen representative of FBU members.

Paul’s discipline case has now concluded, meaning that the brigade is no longer in a position to make

demands about whether he should attend.

With this in mind, the union called a meeting between the two sides for 21 June. The brigade accepted the invitation, but in doing so suggested that the meeting had been called too late to influence the outcome of the authority meeting three days later, on account of there being a requirement to circulate official papers relating to the meeting eight days in advance. But this is a red herring, says the union. It is common for supplementary papers to be submitted to authority meetings long after the eight-day deadline, and sometimes just minutes before meetings commence. Indeed, this is a practice about which the union has previously raised concerns.

It was this lack of enthusiasm to commit to meaningful negotiation that convinced the union to call for a protest lobby.

Speaking this morning, the union’s regional secretary, Joe MacVeigh, said, “We are urging all off-duty firefighters to attend this lobby. We are nearing crunch time.

“It’s time to tell Brian Coleman that enough is enough. We are sick and tired of him and his fire authority colleagues attempting to smash our hard-won conditions of service. Councillor Coleman’s agenda may be clear, but I honestly feel there are some sensible senior uniformed officers who do not want a dispute, and it is time for them to start speaking-up.”

Joe went on, “Time and again we have proved that the argument that increases in productivity can best be secured by moving to 12-hour shifts are fatally flawed. That suggests the brigade’s proposals are politically-motivated, rather than being based around any kind of rationale or sensible research.

“If Brian Coleman thinks that 12-hour shifts are inevitable, he’d better think again. We just won’t accept them, and we will fight him in the courts and on the picket lines if he doesn’t back off.

“I urge members to get to the lobby and make their voices heard. It’s time to start increasing the pressure. It’s time to unite and fight.”



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