

NEWS REPORT



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TRADE DISPUTE LIFTED

THE LONG-RUNNING trade dispute that began as a result of the decision of the commissioner last August to start the process of mass termination of contracts over new start and finish times has finally ended.

A collective agreement on new timings was signed in January, but there were a few outstanding issues—such as the conversion of non-op members to FRS, the long-term future of the 27 appliances removed and handed to AssetCo, and disciplinary action against members for alleged activities related to the dispute—on which the FBU needed certain assurances before the union's general secretary was able to formally lift the trade dispute.

With progress having been made on some of these issues, the FBU's London regional committee at its meeting on 11 February voted to formally lift the trade dispute letter and demand the brigade make good on its promise to immediately return the 27 requisitioned appliances.

Regrettably, however, the brigade contacted the union later that day and said they were not in a position to return the appliances for at least another three days (see next item).

The FBU's regional secretary for London, Joe MacVeigh, said, "I want to pay tribute to all London FBU members for the way they stood firm throughout the dispute. The industrial action was supported solidly throughout the brigade, and it was this united action that in the end forced our employers to reach a compromise that was some distance from their original proposal.

"We always said that we would never bow to the threat of mass

sackings, and we didn't. Of course I accept that the outcome has involved some degree of compromise on our part as well, but I believe the final settlement is one which our members can live with.

"I think we can hold our heads high in the knowledge that we were not bullied into an agreement, but that our industrial action created the necessary pressure to force our employers to reach a settlement by consent.

"The brigade wishes to introduce the new start and finish times in early May, and the FBU will monitor the situation and work hard to ensure that the process of change is undertaken with minimum upheaval and with due regard for the welfare of our members."

ASSETCO ON THE BRINK AS DEBTS MOUNT

THE COMPANY which holds the contract to supply a strikebreaking force of firefighters to the London Fire Brigade during periods of industrial action is reportedly near to collapse.

There have been a slew of stories in this week's newspapers about the serious financial troubles currently being experienced by AssetCo, who in 2009 were awarded the £12million contract by the brigade after winning the bid to provide the back-up crews.

The firm already owns the entire fleet of London fire appliances and was also in the running to secure contracts for providing other services, such as training.

On Monday, the *Financial Times* reported that shares in AssetCo had plummeted following the disclosure that the firm was not able to pay a

£4million bill (believed owed to the Inland Revenue). The *Guardian* revealed that the company was "running out of cash" after buy-out talks failed. These stories were picked up by other national newspapers, including the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph*.

Questions about the brigade's relationship with AssetCo were first raised after revelations that the chair of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, Councillor Brian Coleman, had been wined and dined on several occasions by senior AssetCo executives and also received expensive gifts from the company.

FBU regional official Paul Embery said, "Over the last few months, we have been receiving reports from well-informed sources that the company was in dire straits. There was talk that it was unable to pay some of its own employees and was racking up unpaid bills to suppliers to the tune of thousands of pounds. It seems that these reports were true. It also seems that the company did not have the resources to return the 27 appliances removed during the strike to their stations when the FBU lifted the trade dispute on 11 February; instead, firefighters volunteered to travel to the company's depot on 14 February to collect them. If our members had not volunteered, then it's anyone's guess when the machines would have eventually been returned.

"Prior to this, the chair of the fire authority, Brian Coleman, and the commissioner, Ron Dobson, had assured the public that the appliances would be returned immediately that the FBU lifted the trade dispute. As it turned out, this commitment was not kept, and many Londoners were deprived of proper fire cover for an extra three days.

"These developments highlight the folly of introducing privatisation into

emergency services. Large chunks of the London Fire Brigade have been sold off to a gang of vultures whose only objective is to make a fast buck. That company now seems to be on its last legs.

“The plight of AssetCo should be a shot across the bow of any politician who thinks that leaving public safety to the mercy of the markets is a good idea.”

CREW MANAGER LEGAL ACTION

THE FBU continues to pursue a legal action against the London Fire Brigade over their insistence that crew managers with the star attribute can be forced to act-up to watch manager at all times. The brigade’s position on this led them to dock the pay of hundreds of crew managers who declined offers to act-up during the recent industrial dispute.

The brigade argues that these crew managers breached their contract by refusing to act-up, while the union says that all acting-up is voluntary and there has never been a collective agreement that crew managers could be forced to perform the duties of a higher role.

It is hoped that the case will be heard before an employment tribunal within the next three months.

UNION INVESTIGATING WANDSWORTH INCIDENT

THE FBU continues to play a full role in the serious accident investigation which is taking place following a fire which resulted in injuries to four Wandsworth firefighters. In addition, the union is also investigating recent incidents in Deptford and Stoke Newington.

For the moment, the union is carrying out a joint investigation with the London Fire Brigade. A safety message was circulated to members yesterday (16 February), and further advice may be issued as the investiga-

tion develops.

Such is the nature of serious accident investigations, members will appreciate the process can often be a lengthy one.

We again extend our support and best wishes to those involved and wish them a speedy recovery.

BRIGADE U-TURN OVER CPD PAYMENTS

FBU OFFICIALS have reacted angrily to the decision by brigade managers to drop a longstanding proposal to simplify the annual continual professional development (CPD) application process by consolidating the payment into core salaries.

The brigade first made the proposal in March 2010, in anticipation of payments being made on 1 July that year. The proposal would have meant an end to the existing complex, long-winded and time-consuming application procedure, replacing it with a much simpler system which would have seen the total “pot” of money divided between those with the necessary length of service to be eligible for the scheme and paid into salaries without the need to complete an application form.

The proposal, if introduced, would have benefitted both the brigade and union members. Consequently, the union looked upon the proposal favourably, notified the brigade of agreement in principle, and was keen to progress discussions.

Soon afterwards, brigade managers indicated that they were seeking the necessary legal approval for the revised protocols and that this may take some time. In the meantime, they proposed that payments for the year be deferred and discussions extended. The FBU agreed to these proposals in good faith.

Some time later, the brigade suggested that the proposal be introduced into the discussions over new shifts and be part of any subsequent collective agreement. As CPD was not related to shifts, and as the brigade’s proposal was made prior to the dispute over this issue, the FBU preferred for it to remain a “stand alone” issue, rather

than be used as a bargaining chip inside shift negotiations.

After several weeks of delay and procrastination, the brigade has now informed the union that it no longer has any intention of following through on its original proposal.

To make matters worse, the brigade is now seeking to introduce more stringent criteria for the interim/fast-track application procedure for future years, which will make it harder for members to secure payment. The interim/fast-track procedure was itself introduced by the brigade in an attempt to simplify the national application process.

The brigade’s changes to the interim/fast-track procedure are being made without agreement from the FBU, and despite the fact that the brigade had previously given a commitment not to impose new criteria.

The u-turn has set the scene for further industrial disharmony, just as the dispute over shifts reaches its end.

The union’s executive council member for London, Ian Leahair said, “The brigade’s conduct over CPD has been shabby and dishonourable. They came to us with a proposal, which we agreed to in principle, and then they took it off the table after stringing us along for months.

“At a meeting on Tuesday, we demanded that the back pay on CPD that has been owing to our members since last July be paid into salaries in this month’s pay packets. The brigade said this wasn’t possible on account of the tight deadline. Funny how they are able to dock members’ money at the drop of a hat during periods of industrial action, but they cannot quickly pay money back that they have owed for eight months.

“We now urge members to complete only the standard national application form for the coming year’s payment, rather than the interim/fast-track form which may now be introduced without agreement.”



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