

# **FIRE BRIGADES UNION**

**IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 28 JULY 2011**

## **FIRE BRIGADES UNION PUTS GOVERNMENT ON NOTICE AS IT STEPS UP PREPARATIONS FOR INDUSTRIAL ACTION BALLOT OVER PENSIONS**

The Fire Brigades Union has put the Government on notice of a nationwide fire strike over its plans for fire crews to pay more, work longer and get less. Industrial action looks increasingly likely in the autumn.

The union is currently consulting firefighters across the UK. Although this is not yet complete, it is showing huge support for industrial action. The union is therefore making preliminary arrangements for balloting members.

The union has also raised concerns over the continued block on retained firefighters being allowed entry to the main firefighters pension scheme, despite a House of Lords judgment to that effect. These fire crews continue to be robbed of a pension they are legally entitled to. Once access to a pension has been eventually delivered, they also face the same attacks as wholetime firefighters.

The union says it is very clear that the proposed pension changes are not about affordability, but about clawing back money from public sector workers by raising contributions to pay for the budget deficit. This deficit was triggered by the near collapse of the banks and the need for huge public borrowing to fund the bank bail out.

Fire service scheme specific talks have been initiated. Key points of contention are Government plans to:

Increase contributions to the main Firefighter Pension Scheme from 11% to 14% for firefighters and to 17% for fire officers who have taken promotion. Fire crews already pay the highest contributions, alongside the police. At 11%, firefighters already pay more than twice the average employee contribution in the private sector (5.2%)

Increase the pension age to at least 60. The union says it is unlikely people in their late fifties and beyond would be physically able to perform firefighting duties. It would lead to firefighters being threatened with the sack in their final years of service because they'd be unable to physically perform firefighting duties.

Proposals to scrap all existing firefighters pensions schemes by 2015 and introduce a new scheme;

Cutting the value of pensions by only increasing them in line with the Consumer Price Index which will typically mean lower increases than using the Retail Price Index. As well as opposing this by industrial means, the union is also taking the Government to judicial review in a hearing scheduled

for October 25, 26 and 27. If the union wins the court case, the Government may still try and push the change through at a later date.

Base pensions on career earnings and not final salary.

Matt Wrack, FBU General Secretary said: “This pensions robbery is a crude smash and grab raid on firefighter pension rights to help pay for the budget deficit. It is nothing to do with long-term sustainability or affordability.

“These proposals have been drafted by people who are completely ignorant of the real work firefighters are required to do. It is daft to expect people of 60 and beyond to work as an operational firefighter. Even the very fittest will struggle to do that, it will not work in the real world.

“The pensions contributions rise will lead to an exodus from the main scheme with as many as one in four firefighters saying they will leave it. That will cost the taxpayer and extra £210 million, no savings at all, and undermine the scheme.

“We’re not going to pay for the mistakes of those who broke the banks by their own greed and stupidity. The Government is not going to be allowed to gamble with our pensions in the same way.

“Nearly half of all fire crews say they will consider leaving the fire service if these changes are forced through. That would impact on the operational effectiveness of the fire service at all levels.

“We’re already facing a pay freeze at a time of raging inflation and major frontline cuts. The impact on morale will be devastating, this is a toxic brew for the fire service to swallow.

“If the Government thinks it can consult, discuss and impose without a reaction they must think again. Fire crews will not pay for the mistakes of the Chancellor’s banking friends who brought the public finances to this state.

“We have not sought a confrontation on this issue but firefighters are furious at these plans. When we ballot we expect a high turnout and a high yes vote for industrial action.

“The Government is on notice from today. We will negotiate in good faith but they should be in no doubt as to the strength of feeling across the fire service at all levels.”

## NOTES

Proposed changes to the main firefighter pension scheme could cost the taxpayer £210 million instead of saving money. One in four firefighters say they will consider leaving the scheme if the changes are pushed through, producing a sharp drop in contributions.

A sharp hike in already very high contribution rates would be one of the triggers for an exodus from the scheme. At 11% of salary, firefighters – along with the police - already pay the highest contribution rates of any scheme in the public sector. This is already more than twice the average employee contribution in the private sector (5.2%)

The Government's proposed changes to the Firefighters Pensions Scheme (FPS) aim to save £73 million by 2014. But this is based on assuming only 1% would opt out of the FPS, by far the largest pension scheme for fire crews.

Every 1% of current members who opt out of the scheme will cost £3.5 million in lost contributions each year. A YouGov survey of nearly 8,000 firefighters found that the burden of the changes were so great that as many as one in four (27%) are considering opting out of the pension scheme.

If that happens, the changes would cost the Government £283.5 million in lost contributions by 2014 (£94.5 million a year) and undermine the viability of the pension scheme. Including the savings of £73 million by 2014, the lost contributions would mean a net loss to the scheme of £210 million.

The YouGov survey also found that nearly half the country's firefighters and officers will consider leaving the service if the Government pushes through its pension plans. The Fire Brigades Union warn that pension changes risk devastating morale and damaging the fire service.

Those earning promotion would be hit hardest, paying considerably more and getting a lot less. The union has warned that even the fittest firefighter will struggle to fight fires in their late 50s and beyond.

The findings come from a YouGov poll for the Fire Brigades Union which found nearly half (45%) saying they would consider leaving the fire service if the changes are pushed through. 62% said the changes - impacting more heavily on officers - would effect their decision to apply for promotion.

The total sample size was 7,981 current FBU members currently working in the Fire Service. The survey ran from Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> May to Friday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2011. It was carried out online and the figures have not been weighted. YouGov is registered with the Information Commissioner and is a member of the British Polling Council.

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