

FIRE BRIGADES UNION

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FIRE BRIGADES UNION TAKES FIRST STEP TO INDUSTRIAL ACTION BALLOT

The Fire Brigades Union has told Ministers in the Government and devolved administrations to deliver fair pensions in the fire service and reject Whitehall plans for fire crews to pay more, work longer and get less. It is the first step towards balloting the union's 43,000 members across the UK.

The plans also propose increasing pension contributions by between 3.2% and 6%, a move which will cost fire crews between £2,000 and £7,500 by 2014. Fire crews in the main pension scheme face the highest payments in the public sector, up from 11% to 14.2% for firefighters and 17% for fire officers who have taken promotion.

The higher tier contributions increases of up to 6% start kicking in for thousands of junior officers based at fire stations from station managers upwards.

The union described the increases as a tax on fire crews as part of a smash and grab raid on their pensions to help pay off 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.

The union has warned the increases will see an exodus from the pension scheme which relies on contributions coming in to pay the pensions going out. One in four members of the main pension scheme say they could leave the pensions scheme, costing taxpayers £210 million to fund the shortfall in contributions.

Nearly half of all firefighters say they could leave the fire service if the proposals are pushed through.

The union has made it clear that the only changes to pensions should be those delivering fairness and equality. Changes to ensure that all uniformed fire service staff are entitled to be members of the relevant pension scheme, changes to equalise retirement ages for fire crews and to secure RPI as the basis for increasing pensions.

FBU General secretary Matt Wrack said: "These plans are 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.

"The huge rise in contributions will cost our emergency fire crews between £2,000 and £7,500 by 2014. It's daylight robbery to demand these sums.

"We're facing 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 financial base of the scheme.

"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.

"Fire crews will not pay for the mistakes of the Chancellor's banking friends who brought the public finances to this state. It is unfair to demand that we pick up the bill.

"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.

"We have not sought a confrontation on this issue but fire crews are furious at these plans and the failure to deliver a positive agenda of fair pensions across the board. We hope that ministers will reject them and instead back our members' proposals for pensions based on equality. When we ballot we expect a high turnout and a high yes vote for industrial action."

FBU members seek fair pensions:

* Changes to ensure that all personnel covered by the nationally negotiated pay and conditions are entitled to be members of the relevant firefighters pension scheme.

2 Changes to ensure that the normal retirement age for firefighter members is that applicable in the relevant Firefighters Pensions Scheme.

3 Amendments to secure RPI as the basis for increasing pensions in the fire service.

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.

The Government's proposed changes to the Firefighters Pensions Scheme (FPS) aim to save a total of £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 60s.

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 18th May to Friday 17th 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.