

Our Ref: AD/sll

18 August 2006

Cllr Tony Newman - Chair
Cllr Eddie Clein - Liberal Democrats Leader
Cllr Les Byrom - Conservative Leader
Merseyside Fire & Rescue Authority
Headquarters
Bridle Road
Merseyside
L30 4YD

Dear Cllrs Newman, Clein & Byrom

I am in receipt of an amount of correspondence to the FBU emanating from the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service/Authority regarding the impending industrial action in Merseyside. I should inform you that for a very short time I am acting in the role of General Secretary. I recognize the time and effort you have devoted to generating that correspondence as an alternative to trying to find the means to both resolve the trade dispute and the underlying financial shortfall which you are using as the excuse to cut the cover afforded to the public of Merseyside. For that reason I feel I should respond to your correspondence.

Financial shortfall

I note that you admit that your changes are driven by the financial crisis of your own making rather than perpetuating the myth that is in some way an attempt to improve fire cover or efficiency.

I note from your correspondence dated 17th August 2006 that in that same letter you refer to the Fire Authority's £8.4 million deficit and at the same time talk of acting "responsibly".

Industrial action and public safety

You will of course recall that the FBU representatives of Merseyside have provided you with a solution to the financial difficulty which you have created. I, of course, recall that you preferred to proceed to recommend swingeing cuts to fire cover rather than adopt the fully-costed proposals that were presented by our Officials.

Forgive me for taking licence in drawing a comparison between your assertion concerning industrial action and public safety, when the industrial action is the result of the Fire Authority cutting the number of Firefighter posts in Merseyside by 120 which is in addition to the 68 which you agreed last year. This is of course in addition to the cut of 15 posts in Merseyside's Emergency Fire Control who dispatch fire engines to incidents. That appears to equate to a 15% cut in posts in 2 years.

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There has been a large volume of correspondence which has been sent to the FBU recently. I am somewhat surprised that in your correspondence you suggest that public safety will be compromised by a Firefighters strike yet the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service website carries an article lifted from the Daily Post which quotes Phil Toase, the President of the Chief Fire Officers' Association as saying:

"Whilst the Merseyside Fire Authority recognises that it will be unable to provide the same level of service to which the community is accustomed, it is confident that the service will still be able to provide adequate levels of cover.

"In the event of an unexpected level of demand, arrangements have been agreed with neighbouring fire authorities to provide additional resources."

Moreover I note from your website that your press release dated 16 August 2006, under the heading "Keeping the community safe in a strike" states:

"This is the most comprehensive fire cover ever provided during industrial action on Merseyside because in the past the Fire Service has had to rely solely on the military and Green Goddesses."

That same press release quotes Cllr Tony Newman, the Chair of Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (one of the recipients of this letter), as saying:

"Whilst we still hope that the FBU will withdraw the threat of strike and use the recognised local and national processes... we have a strong contingency plan in place."

I am therefore at something of a loss in being able to reconcile your comments in your letters to the FBU, and the comments that you have made in your press releases. I assume that as a public Authority the public statements stating that you can provide fire cover which you have described as being: "most comprehensive" and "strong" made by yourselves which you have published on your website to be the most accurate.

I therefore feel I should inform you that I am not minded to exempt any fire stations from any strike action.

Firefighters earning opportunities.

You make reference in your letter to industrial action not enhancing the earning opportunity available to Firefighters in Merseyside.

Surely that in itself should tell you something. The decision whether to take the discontinuous strike action will be determined by our members in Merseyside.

I am absolutely confident that the point will not be lost on the council tax-payers of Merseyside that frontline Firefighters, Officers and Emergency Fire Control Staff do not opt, without good reason, to take strike action which will result in them earning zero pay during the periods that they take that strike action.. Our members vote "yes" in ballots for industrial action knowing that the effect will be to reduce their household income by withdrawing their labour and refraining from carrying out their duties in their chosen profession. They do not make that decision lightly.

Whilst members and officials of the Fire Authority are being paid quite handsomely as staffing levels are cut, it is FBU members who will be losing money in trying to safeguard the service. They will do that by choice through a secret ballot. It is FBU members who themselves are prepared to sacrifice their income to protect the public.

I feel it pertinent to say that I note that none of the parties which you represent sought or achieved a democratic mandate from the public to cut Firefighters jobs or fire engine availability when you stood for election.

Fire Cover in Merseyside and resolving this trade dispute.

Your proposals to cut 135 uniformed staff posts in Merseyside and the removal of fire cover provided by four fire engines at night-time, follows, as stated earlier, your decision to reduce 68 personnel last year. This strident and unnecessary reduction of personnel and reduction fire cover is a cut. Euphemistically, calling these reductions "*modernization*" fools no-one. Less is never more, no matter how many times you say it.

Officials of this Union spend their time doing what the public expects truly professional Firefighters and their representatives to do - to protect and increase fire cover. Most of our work is performed quietly, outside of the spotlight of media focus and attention. Sometimes our Officials are forced to defend the Fire Service by leading our members in strike action when persuasion and argument with Fire Authorities and principal officers has failed.

The General Secretary has within this past year readily dispatched his National Officials, like myself, to help assist in resolving trade disputes over fire cover and other issues in Hertfordshire and elsewhere. It is never too late for you to resolve this trade dispute by withdrawing your attacks on the public's fire cover and Firefighters.

I can only hope that you will seek to follow an alternative to your present strategy which aims to do no more than divert attention from the true solution to this unfortunate trade dispute which has been forced upon our members by your failings.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andy Dark', with a stylized, cursive script.

ANDY DARK
ASSISTANT GENERAL SECRETARY, FBU

cc: Ruth Winters - FBU President
Matt Wrack - FBU General Secretary
Les Skarratts - FBU Merseyside
Brendan Barber - TUC General Secretary
Sir Graham Meldrum - HMICIFS
John Ransford - LGA
Gill Gittins - NJC