

FIRE BRIGADES UNION

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ESSEX FIRE SERVICE DISPUTE – BOTH TALKS AND INDUSTRIAL ACTION CONTINUE

Three hours of talks aimed at settling the Essex firefighters' dispute ended at 12.30 today with no agreement. The overtime ban and refusal to cover work resulting from staff shortages, which began at 9a.m. this morning, continues indefinitely.

However, the Fire Brigades Union described these new talks as showing an improved atmosphere. "Management displayed a willingness to discuss ideas, and that is something we have not seen before" said FBU Essex Fore Brigade Chair Keith Flynn. "Unfortunately, they are still determined to remove 44 frontline firefighters' jobs. But talks will continue."

Both sides agreed to reconvene talks after the union negotiators have reported back to union members.

Keith Flynn added: "We went into this morning's talks hoping that we might get a mutually acceptable way forward that can be supported by the professionals who save lives and fight fires. We are far from achieving that but we have made a little progress.

"We have continuously asked for a joint review to find and agree alternatives to the current cuts to the frontline. Today, the Chief Fire Officer told us the management would be carrying out a full review of the Service to find further efficiency savings and invited the FBU to be involved in the process. But it seems the fire authority are still hell-bent on getting rid of more than forty firefighters from frontline fire stations and this means there will be fewer firefighters spread more thinly across Essex, leaving too few firefighters on duty to crew all the fire engines when they are needed in a 999 emergency.

"If the money can be found to fund a multi-million pound increase in the IT budget then it must be found to pay for the 999 service. If they can also afford to think about buying a helicopter they can afford to fund the frontline services the public and businesses need.

"We look forward to resuming talks soon but in the absence of any concrete proposals to settle the dispute then the industrial action shall continue."

Essex Fire and Rescue Service are set to implement a rolling programme of cuts to the frontline 999 emergency response service.

The Fire Authority proposes to cut the number of firefighters from 954 firefighters in December 2008, to an average of 940 during 2008/9, to 920 during 2009/10, to 905 in March 2010.

Forty four of those jobs – one in ten of the frontline fire station based crews -would go by reducing

the way higher reach aerial ladder platforms and rescue tenders are crewed. The impact would be there would not be enough firefighters to crew all appliances, even if they were needed in a 999 emergency.

The union has also objected to a number of other changes which it says local managers are trying to impose rather than negotiate.

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