

Europe and Fire Seminar
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House of Commons

The Role of Public Service Unions

presented by Andy Dark Assistant General Secretary, Fire Brigades Union United Kingdom

Our history, as a union representing over 95% of the Service's uniformed staff, and the professional development and growth of the fire and rescue service in the UK is extremely closely entwined.

We have long played a key role in developing and promoting the UK fire service agenda, including an active involvement in developing national and international standards and guidance within the UK for a range of fire safety and firefighter related issues. We are proud to call upon the professional experiences and technical expertise of our members to develop standards in many areas which would only serve to enhance public safety and the safety of firefighters.

The FBU has also long recognised the importance of the European Union and that it is an intensely political arena where a high degree of collective working with other firefighter unions and other fire related organisations and associations is needed if we are to ensure that fire

is firmly placed upon on the European agenda and remains there. This objective we believe is something to be both actively developed and energetically pursued.

As Europe becomes more integrated, it is only natural that public service unions such as ours seek to project our voice in the European arena.

We know that other fire and rescue service bodies are doing this, joining together in organisations such as CTIF and FEU, to share information and pursue common goals. Equally, the fire industry and the insurers have European organisations and associations set up and playing a part in lobbying the European commission on fire safety and fire related issues.

Last year a large number of public sector unions representing firefighters within the EU came together with the aim of re-forming and re-energising the firefighter union network previously created under the auspices of the EPSU and which now stretches from Portugal and Ireland in the West to Latvia and Slovakia in the East

and from the Scandinavian nations in the North to Spain and Greece in the South.

We held our meeting here in the UK during last summer, where discussions revealed a range of common issues facing our memberships. One central theme was our desire to see properly funded fire and rescue services. We also reconfirmed the need for an EU wide Firefighters Charter which we originally published with EPSU back in the mid 1990's. We are now in the process of redeveloping and renewing the Charter in co-operation with our colleagues in EPSU and those other firefighters trade unions.

We have campaigned in the past for the creation of standing fire safety commission sited within and part of the European Commission where at the moment fire issues are scattered across a number of Directorates. It seems logical to us that such a body should be in place to discuss and offer assistance and guidance on an EU wide basis in respect of a wide range of fire issues and peripheral issues that affect us all, such as the threat of international terrorism and climate change which are affecting all our nations.

We note that the European Commission has created an EU Fire Safety Network consisting of government representatives from the Member States however we only found out that the Network had been created in 2006. The first annual report of the Network was published in March 2006.

We wonder how many other groups who have interest in fire matters are still unaware of its existence or how they might put forward an issue for consideration by the members of the Network. Nevertheless we very much welcome the initiative to create the Network, but we are concerned regarding the lack of publicity surrounding it and we also feel it is too restricted in its membership and needs to be opened up to involve more organisations than simply those of government. We remain confident that these matters will be reviewed.

The Network has an interest in many fire safety issues that certainly we would wish both to be involved with and support them upon. Many of the issues I shall read out as being discussed by the Network, and this is not an exhaustive list, have both national and international

significance and I suspect that many of you here today will also be familiar with them;

1. The creation of common European Fire Statistics
- 2 The introduction of reduced ignition propensity cigarettes - or fire “safer” cigarettes
- 3 Fire safety in hotels
- 4 The European Fire Safety Concept
- 5 The principle of building design for universal accessibility by all persons including the disabled
- 6 New fire extinguishing systems, agents and standards
- 7 Expanded polystyrene (EPS) as an insulation material in buildings
- 8 Cooperation with other European fire organisations

What I have to ask is would it not be more appropriate if we could pool our collective knowledge and resources, connect with the Network and attempt to find solutions to some of these issues. Many of these issues are not new they have been around for years and perhaps instead of constantly talking about them let's try something new and try to collectively resolve them. What do you think?

Moving away from the EU Fire Safety Network - the providers of fire and rescue services across the EU, whether they be national regional or local governments have to be able to provide an efficient and effective service that is able to protect their communities from traditional risks such as accidental fires, explosions, emergency rescues and transport incidents as well as dealing with the emerging and very serious risks of terrorism and climate change. They have to be able to do this while ensuring everything possible is done to minimize the risk to frontline firefighters.

Whether its health, education, utilities or fire and rescue, public sector unions have a strong tradition as guardians of the public service ethos of serving our communities,

Defending what is good and striving for ever higher standards in a changing environment.

Public Sector Unions and our members - the professional people who deliver the Service day in day out and who know better than most what works and perhaps even more pertinently, what is needed to provide the public with a effective and efficient fire and rescue service - want to carry forward this mission in partnership. We strongly believe that a process of change through confrontation is to nobody's benefit least of all the public's and is something that is to be avoided.

We do believe that whilst confronting the challenges of the present and the future, we need to ensure that we don't focus on arguments which should be left in the past.

It has to be remembered that what is delivered on the ground by any public service organisation or provider is always dependent upon on the goodwill and professionalism of their employees and in real terms often relies upon employee goodwill to deliver far more than is contractually demanded of them.

We are anxious that we avoid initiatives that only serve to undermine the pride in firefighters work and the goodwill of public service workers that is needed in times of great change.

Employment stability is central to ensuring full employee focus on progress in the delivery of services.

We will not pretend that we do not have concerns regarding planning arrangements on the effects of cost-cutting on the provision of fire services.

The FBU plays its part in trying to ensure this process does not end up negatively affecting the safety of communities or firefighters. And we don't want to see members of the public dying in fires because a

fire station has been closed and response times have been lengthened.

Joint working and partnership will assist in addressing those matters.

We don't want our members faced with taking unnecessary risks by being sent to incidents in insufficient numbers without the right equipment and without the right backup.

And we will campaign to make sure the communities who will be affected by any proposed detrimental to the Service are made aware of them and encourage them to have their say.

This is still one of the most dangerous jobs around and both at national level and through our network of regional and local health and safety reps the FBU does its best to minimise the risks.

And historically this has produced results in terms of better training, equipment, working conditions and safer operating procedures.

But tragically fatalities continue. In December, two firefighters were killed on duty in the UK. Firefighters were also killed on duty in Italy, Hungary and the Czech Republic last year.

The dangers of the job must be recognised in terms of appropriate pay, pension benefits and compensation packages for dependents affected by death or injury of a firefighter.

If there is one constant in the fire and rescue service, it is change. And for the record, we are not against it. To the contrary.

But it must be change for a positive purpose not change for its own sake.

Firefighters, it must be remembered, have been modernising, upgrading their skills, broadening their roles and responsibilities, constantly since the Fire Service was first established.

And this has been recognised in new UK legislation that belatedly puts on a statutory footing much of what we had already been doing.

As representatives of the professionals at the fire service frontline, we will continue to strive to build on the strengths of the fire service for the benefit of communities.

We need the highest standards in both prevention, intervention and product design. We need to ensure a committed and diverse workforce across Europe who are, and feel, valued to deliver those services.

We hope we can work with all fire and rescue service stakeholders at a national and European level on this goal: to make our fire and rescue services ready and able to face the many challenges of the 21st century.

ENDS.