FBU Executive Council statement (18 October 2011)

The FBU Executive Council today (18 October 2011) considered the latest developments in talks between the union and government on pensions.

As a result of these considerations, the Executive Council agreed at this stage to refrain from initiating an immediate ballot for strike action.

The FBU remains totally opposed to the attacks on public sector pension schemes. The campaign to defend public sector pensions is part of a wider campaign to defend good quality public services. We are opposed to the austerity programme of the coalition government which seeks to make working people pay for an economic crisis they did not cause. The campaign to defeat the attacks of the coalition government needs the maximum unity of the trade union movement as well as the support and involvement of the wider community, including students and young people, pensioners and others. It is a campaign which will involve prolonged political campaigning and industrial action where necessary. The FBU continues to support the campaign of all unions and of the TUC against the various attacks we face, including on our pensions.

Scheme-specific talks

The discussions on pensions have recently moved into a new phase, involving detailed discussions within each scheme. The FBU did not support this move at the time since key principles (retirement age, contribution increases etc) had not been resolved through central talks between the government and the TUC. However, once scheme-specific talks had begun it became our job to ensure the best possible outcome for FBU members. All our activity has been to this end.

The FBU and the wider trade union movement have clearly stated that occupational pension schemes must take account of the needs of the relevant occupation. We believe there are a number of such specific factors in relation to the fire and rescue service, in particular around the physical demands of the profession and the very high contribution rates already paid by firefighters.

The FBU has produced a range of evidence, supported by experts on issues including:

- Contribution rates
- Retirement age
- Control members' access to the fire service scheme

We have presented this evidence to government Ministers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and sought talks on the issues in each. It is clear that the outcome of this process is largely dependent on the decisions to be made by the Westminster government.

Cost ceilings

The FBU raised concerns at the proposal to introduce 'cost ceilings' for each scheme. We argued that these would set a financial straitjacket for discussions. We wrote to Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles on 5 August asking for the cost ceiling not to be set, at least until such time as we were able to outline our various concerns and positions and present the evidence we have collated.

The government's initial position that cost ceilings would be set on 1 October was the trigger which caused the union to register trade disputes in all parts of the UK on 14 September.

However, the Treasury confirmed on 7th October that a cost ceiling for the firefighters' schemes (excluding the LGPS) would be delayed until later in the autumn. This delay is clear shift in position and is a direct result of the request made by the FBU and the various issues we have raised in relation to our schemes. This does not in any way resolve the challenges we face but is, nevertheless, a welcome move.

The union is now engaged in detailed dialogue with government officials, including government actuaries. In this we seek to expose the flaws and failings in the government figures and claims. We are confident we have very powerful and robust arguments. We are confident that any genuinely open consideration of the issues we have raised would lead to significant changes in the government's position. It remains to be seen whether such a change will take place.

Timetable

The move to scheme-specific talks has now highlighted a number of differences regarding timescales in relation to the discussions in the various pension schemes:

- Consultation (for England) on contribution rates for the fire service schemes does not end until December 2.
- Cost ceilings for the firefighters' schemes will be set considerably later than for other schemes.

Industrial action

The Executive Council remains firmly committed to defending fire service pensions. At branches throughout the UK, FBU members have already voted strongly in favour of strike action if it is necessary. We are confident that if such a call is made it will receive overwhelming support from members.

Discussions continue and the government has agreed to **our** request to delay the setting of cost ceilings in order to allow us to examine the basis for their proposals and for them to consider our evidence. We are also mindful that members expect industrial action to be taken as a last resort and when further negotiation is futile. Our conclusion at this time is that such a point has not been reached. Therefore the Executive Council has agreed at this stage to refrain from initiating an immediate ballot for strike action.

Should progress not be made in talks, the Executive Council will launch a ballot for strike action as agreed at annual conference 2011. Any such action called will be determined, meaningful and will be coordinated with other unions as appropriate.

TUC Day of Action: November 30

The FBU is fully committed to supporting the TUC day of action and will urge members to join with other workers in protesting against the attacks on pensions and other austerity measures. We urge the government to engage in meaningful negotiations with other unions in their pension scheme-specific talks.