



Labour Party Democracy Review

FBU submission to the Labour Party Democracy Review June 2018

Introduction

This is the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) submission to the Labour Party's Democracy Review. The FBU is the democratic, professional voice of firefighters and other workers within fire and rescue services across the UK. We represent the vast majority of whole-time (full-time) and retained (part-time, on-call) operational firefighters and operational fire control staff across the UK.

The FBU welcomes the Labour Party Democracy Review and strongly supports efforts to democratise the party. The union believes that the thousands of new members, many of them trade unionists, along with longstanding party activists, supporters and members, should be able to fully participate in the decision making structures of the party.

The FBU welcomes many of the specific proposals advocated by other affiliated trade unions, the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) and by Momentum to remove the bureaucratic barriers that have built up over previous years. The union wants the party structures to facilitate rational discussion and joint campaigning. That is the best route to supporting workers' interests and getting a Labour government that stands up for working class people.

The way we work

1. Do changes need made to Annual Conference and if so what?

The FBU believes that Annual Conference should be the sovereign policymaking body of the Labour Party. It is the largest annual gathering of Labour Party members, who are rightly delegated to attend by other members in CLPs, unions and other party bodies. It should be the representative forum in which the whole labour movement thrashes out our political programme and resolves to fight for those ideas in the period ahead.

The FBU believes that in recent years, conference has been too much of a rally and not enough of a labour movement parliament. The Conference Arrangement Committee (CAC) should become more like a standing orders committee in the unions, elected from delegates to conference and by OMOV and charged with facilitating debate. The current system of whereby contemporary motions are only accepted if they are not dealt with by the National Policy Forum (NPF) report also stifles debate.

The majority of conference's time (at least 50%) should be devoted to delegates contributions in debates on which votes are taken. Delegates should have the opportunity at conference to scrutinise the Annual Report, thus allowing conference to hold the NEC to account. Labour Party activists and affiliates should be able to submit emergency motions so that the conference debate focuses on the immediate issues that matter to our members, supporters and voters.

2. What changes (if any) should be made to the way we work at Regional level?

The FBU supports the proposals made by CLPD for Local Government Committees (LGC) to replace Local Campaign Forums (LCF). Local Government Committees should replace Local Campaign Forums across the regions to improve debate and accountability. LCFs since their inception have proven to be unreliable, unattractive and unaccountable. They meet irregularly and have become a stagnant arena that members are not engaging with. Members and affiliates need of a more open, accessible way to campaign and hold their local and regional representatives to account. The rule book should be amended to reflect this.

3. How do we strengthen links between the Party and the trade unions locally?

The FBU believes this is a vital question. The Labour Party should be a party of trade unionists at every level. That should be reflected in the party's programme, structures and in the behaviour of its representatives. Labour councillors and other representatives should as a matter of course consult with and listen to trade unionists, not least among the workforces they are responsible for.

Trade Union Liaison CLP officers should be voting members of Executive Committee's in CLPs. This will aid trade unionists locally to air the collective voice of their respective union and will further democratise local structures.

4. How do we strengthen links between the Party and the trade unions nationally?

As above, the Labour Party should define itself as a party of trade unionists and of working class people in general. A key task of the Labour Party should be to promote and support wider trade union membership in the workforce and trade union representation in government and with employers. Labour's policy for government must include scrapping the anti-union laws and implementing a charter of workers' rights to facilitate trade unionism.

5. How do we get more trade unionists involved with the Party?

Trade unionists will join the Labour Party if the party stands four square for working class people and our interests. Trade unionists will become involved in the party if they believe they will have influence and be able to improve their situation at work and their wider community through Labour Party activism. The FBU believes that more democracy and more campaigning are the key to trade unionist involvement in the party.

6. How do we develop the relationship between Labour local authority representatives and the Party at local level?

FBU members have experienced a number of highly damaging cases where our employers, local fire authorities, have been Labour-run and yet have sought to impose damaging changes to our conditions and to the service we provide to our communities. This has included Section 188 notices to change contracts, new duty and shift systems that worsen public safety and firefighter safety, control room closures, and assaults on national collective bargaining.

This is a key reason why the FBU supports the proposals for Local Government Committees (LGC) to replace Local Campaign Forums (LCF). The FBU believes the LGC should be a key strategic body for Labour in local government, including developing and setting policy at a local level. It should not be a subcommittee of the Labour Group. Councillors should not be officers or delegates to the LGC.

Labour councillors, Assembly members, MPs, MEPs, police and crime commissioners, Combined Authority mayors, Executive mayors and any other elected representatives should be accountable to the CLPs that got them elected. They should be elected and subject to regular re-election within the party. Labour representatives should be subject to recall and where necessary, removal by the party if they are no longer prepared to carry out Labour Party policy in support of working class people.

7. What changes (if any) need to be made to the Party's relationship with any of our Socialist Societies, Friends Groups or other similar groups?

The FBU believes that Disability, BAME and LGBT Labour should all have a representative on the NEC, a Shadow Minister and an annual conference. However we have concerns about how representative some other affiliated organisations are and the way their leadership is held to account. The party should examine whether socialist societies sending up to 5 delegates to each CLP GC is the best way for the party to represent particular interests.

8. How do we harness the potential of social media across all aspects of our democracy and political work?

The FBU supports the official Labour Party and the associated social media campaigns run by Momentum and others for engaging the grassroots and motivating a wide section of the public, particularly young people, to vote Labour in the 2017 general election. The union also believes that the grassroots approach of the twitter/Facebook campaigns associated with the Jeremy Corbyn's two leadership campaigns have much to offer the party. The FBU believes that these valuable bottom-up methods should be utilised going forward and further engage more people to join and participate in the Labour Party.

How we make policy

1. What role should Constituency Labour Parties have in making policy?

The FBU thinks that there are many ways the role of CLPs can be improved in policy making. CLPs should generally operate as All Member Meetings (AMM). Currently, some CLPs operate a General Committee (GC) structure that conduct occasional meetings that are solely restricted to delegates only. This is not the open, transparent party the FBU wants; it is opaque and distances hardworking activists from their own structures.

The FBU supports delegate structures at CLP level. When delegates are required to vote (i.e. those eligible to vote) this can still be done under the auspices of AMM. Decisions at local level should not take place behind closed doors.

CLPs should have more influence on policy making at annual conference. The present situation allowing CLPs to submit either a single motion or a constitutional amendment is not sufficient. The party should examine how to expand CLP input into conference motions, amendments and constitutional amendments.

2. What role should Party Conference have in making policy?

The FBU underlines that annual conference should be the supreme organ of the Labour Party. Conference needs to reassert meaningful power by becoming the principal policymaking arena that passes motions that are subsequently included in the manifesto. For too long the annual conference has been a set piece rally for the party leadership, disempowering members and affiliates alike.

3. What role should motions and contemporary motions have at Conference?

The FBU believes the best system for conference involves normal motions from affiliates and CLPs and if necessary, emergency motions that allow members to move items which relate to significant events that have taken place since respective deadlines have passed. This is established labour movement practice.

4. How do we develop local and regional economic plans and local policy?

The FBU believes a more robust annual conference, a more accountable NEC, strengthening CLP structures and adopting LGC will help develop local and regional economic plans and local policy.

5. How can motions from Constituency Labour Parties be dealt with more effectively?

As above, the FBU believes this depends on a more democratic annual conference, the role of the NEC in implementing policy and on the democratic structures of the party.

6. What are your views on the National Policy Forum and how it works?

The FBU believes that the National Policy Forum (NPF) is not fit for purpose. It diminishes the sovereign role of conference, with serious impacts on the agenda and motion submission. The union believes the party should consider the abolition of the NPF and replace it with an enhanced role for annual conference, supplemented where necessary by the NEC.

The FBU is aware that others in the movement feel that the NPF should be kept, but reformed within. The following suggestions would go some way towards ameliorating the NPF, if it were to be retained. All members of the NPF should have a direct mandate from CLPs or affiliated trade unions, ensuring that the body is more democratic in its composition. Any future changes made to the NPF will ensure that parity between CLP and affiliated trade unions is maintained.

The FBU support CLPD proposals that conference should be able to vote on minority positions on NPF documents. The FBU proposes that the NPF submits quarterly progress reports to the NEC to ensure that it is competently performing its function.

Electing our leadership

1. How should we elect our party leader?

The FBU believes all parts of the labour movement should play a role in electing the leader of the Labour Party. Currently the nomination process only allows the Parliamentary Labour Party to decide who can appear on the ballot paper. This should be opened up, as set out below.

2. What role should registered supporters have in leadership elections?

The FBU wants all individuals who support the aims of the Labour Party to become a member of the appropriate trade union and of the party itself. Full membership should be their first port of call for all those wanting to be part of the labour movement. However, the union recognises that after decades of decline, 'registered supporters' have role to play in leadership elections.

The current £25 fee for registered supporters is too high. The FBU proposes that the 'registered supporter' cost be reduced to the inaugural £3 level. Moreover, in line with The Labour Party's current membership condition: members are not less than 14 years of age, this should be synchronised with 'registered supporter' status. However, moves should be made to formalise the transition process between 'registered supporter' status and full membership; 'registered supporter' status should be a pit stop to full membership.

3. What should be the nomination threshold to get on the ballot paper to stand for Party Leader?

The FBU welcomed the decision at 2017 Labour annual conference to reduce the threshold in the case of a vacancy for leader or deputy by 10% of the combined Commons members of the PLP and members of the EPLP. The union further proposes that the party allow CLPs and affiliated trade unions to make nominations if they reach the same threshold of 10%. This would provide a wide field of candidates from all sections of the party to participate.

4. How should "freeze dates" work in elections for the Leader, the National Executive Committee and for delegates to Annual and other Conferences?

The issue of 'freeze dates' is a fundamental one to improving the democracy of the party. Unreasonable freeze dates directly dissuade individuals from joining the movement and is an affront to democracy. This was starkly shown in the 2016 leadership election where 125,000 new Labour members were excluded from voting.

The FBU understands that there has to be a cut off for administrative purposes and for practically for party staff. The union proposes that the freeze date for leader and NEC elections should be a month from the close of ballot – allowing sufficient time for new members/registered supporters to join and engage with the Labour Party. Moreover, we propose that delegate nominations to annual conference should be frozen six weeks preceding annual conference. A delegate should have at least 6 months membership to be eligible.

5. Does the current composition of the National Executive Committee need to be changed or not?

The FBU is content with the current size of the NEC. The current proportion of affiliated trade union seats should be maintained and protected. The union believes that the composition of the NEC should reflect the constituent parts of the party, rather than those who represent the party (such as MPs, councillors etc). The FBU believes that the party should explore proposals by CLPD to change the composition of the NEC, by increasing the role of affiliates and reducing those from the PLP and councillors.

6. Does the current system of elections for the National Executive committee need to be changed or not?

The FBU proposes OMOV elections for the Scotland, Wales, BAME and Young seats, these representatives need to be accountable and this change provides respective members with democratic oversight.

Other changes

1. Mandatory reselection

Currently, the method to hold MPs to account are trigger ballots' where all the constituency's branches and its affiliates (trade unions, socialist societies, co-operative organisations) are eligible to vote 'Yes' or 'No' to re-selecting the sitting MP. These are not robust enough in holding MPs to account, even if a majority of branches vote to trigger reselection, this vote still has to be approved by the executive committee of the constituency party in question and the MP has a right to appeal to the NEC.

A number of fire disputes have seen Labour representatives fail to represent firefighters and our party. Representatives such as MPs, councillors and others should not assume that their elected position is a 'job for life'. They represent their constituency but ultimately they are selected by and accountable to their CLPs. Thus, to ensure democratic accountability and the rights of party members to select candidates that reflect their views, the FBU support the need for mandatory reselection of Labour Party MPs in each relevant electoral cycle as essential to safeguard the democracy of the party. Mandatory reselection will ensure that parliamentary candidates earn renewed endorsements from their CLP members. Just like their initial selection when they were subject to democratic participation of members. This was recently passed unanimously by FBU conference in Brighton.

2. Compliance Unit

The FBU is unhappy with the process of expelling and excluding members by the compliance unit. A party should not seek to expel people for expedient and often spurious reasons, but should respect due process. Many members willing to join had been members before, but felt that the party did not represent them; clearly there has been a revitalisation of the party under new management. The FBU believes the party should be open to all those who now accept its aims, including those who may have previously belonged to other parties. The unit should be scrapped.

The FBU understands there needs to be a process for dealing with abuse or other unacceptable behaviour within the party and by party members. However this should be a matter for a separate body within the party, along the lines set out below.

3. Charter of Members' Rights, Code of Ethics and Ombudsperson

The FBU wants the role of the National Constitutional Committee and Disputes Panel clarified. The union would like the NEC to explore the CLPD proposals for a Labour Party Charter of Members' Rights, Code of Ethics and Ombudsperson.