

The Family Friendly Smokescreen

The Thematic Review on Equality and Fairness in the Fire Service September 1999 stated that

We found in a number of respects, the bodies responsible for giving leadership in the Fire Service had so far failed to date to provide sufficient direction in respect of Equality and Fairness.

It went on to state:-

It was found that the most significant involvement by far was the Fire Brigades Union. A clear leadership role has emerged for this Union.

The National Women's Committee has played a massive part in the promotion of equality and fairness in the Fire Service. They have been pushing for years to achieve better, more inclusive working practices for women, such as good maternity provisions, not only looking at pay and time off but also breastfeeding and return to work practices, job share in control rooms (which has proven to be very successful) women's toilets and showers on all fire service premises, a national standard for recruitment (one that actually reflects the job that Fire Service workers actually do), uniform that fits... this is naming just a few.

Currently women firefighters are forced to wear uniform that doesn't fit, wearing fire kit that has not been tested properly, working on fire stations without adequate toilet and shower facilities, arranging maternity provisions as and when they get pregnant because employers have not faced up to their responsibilities. Emergency control staff (of which 79% are women) feel obliged to work excessive amounts of overtime on top of a 42 hour week to overcome staff shortages. These workers are only paid 92% of a firefighter's wage, yet perform a role that is a vital part of the firefighting team. One of the areas of the Fire Brigades Union pay claim is equal pay for emergency control staff. This highlights the case that women's struggle for equality in all areas of employment is neither selfish nor exclusive and would be advantageous to all working people.

All of these things the FBU and the NWC have been striving to change. This has proven to be very difficult faced with an intransigent, non progressive group of employers.

Then along came Bain. He suggests:

“A new, reformed Fire Service, with much broader responsibilities and a new reward structure will offer much to, individual fire staff in terms of better working conditions, earning prospects and choice of career paths. As a result of the reforms, individual Fire Service staff will also have the scope to grow their income through overtime, working as retained firefighters in addition to their whole time service and receiving other local payments. They will also benefit from a more family-friendly and diverse working environment”.

In other words, if you are prepared to work longer hours, then you have the scope to earn a decent wage. This totally excludes women, single parents and anybody who should want a decent quality of life; this is not more family friendly and would not encourage women to look at the Fire Service as a viable job option, therefore not creating a more diverse workforce.

Bain also claims that

“Existing shift systems can be disruptive to family life, unnecessarily inflexible as well as discouraging diversity and equal opportunities”

Quite obviously, none of the people that Bain spoke to had bothered to ask women currently working the shift system what they thought

Contrary to popular belief, this shift system is far from a blockage to equality, diversity and the recruitment of women. It has been found by all of our members who have a family, childcare or caring commitments, to be conducive, if not promotional to a good family life.

Parents/carers currently working this shift system say that it enables them to fulfill both roles of 1) taking care of the family and 2) taking a full part in their career of the fire service. It means they can regularly be with their children and/or families for unbroken periods of time, inclusive of weekends and weekdays. In addition, the current shift pattern means that you know when you are working well in advance. This is certainly an important factor when organizing childcare and balancing the needs of the family.

Now on top of Bain and his (Commitment??) to equality and family friendly policies, the Government has stepped in and announced job cuts, station closures and amalgamations / regionalization of control rooms. The FBU already knew this was on the agenda with Bain suggesting whole-time workers performing retained duties and working overtime on top of their 42 hour week.

There are two key points here. The government has set targets to recruit more women and black and ethnic minorities into the Fire Service by 2009 but with the introduction of overtime, whole time retained working, and the announcement of 2% less firefighters each year for four years means there is likely to be none or little recruitment. In addition to not replacing staff and therefore not recruiting women and black and ethnic minorities, one section of the fire service (Emergency Fire Control) that's workforce is predominantly women, they intend to cut under the guise of amalgamation/regionalization.

These two factors alone discredit the Government and Bain's professed interest in creating a more representative fire service.

The FBU has a genuine modernization agenda that has family-friendly, culturally diverse and good equality policies at its core.

These are:

- Real modernization
- Real flexibility for workers
- Job share opportunities for ALL
- Access to crèche facilities for ALL
- Shift systems incorporating enough staff to allow for time off for family or caring roles

- Sensible and acceptable maternity and paternity provisions
- Equal pay for ALL
- Increase in workplace establishments reflecting diversity not increases in overtime for ALL.
- Fair and equitable entry testing and recruitment practices for ALL
- Access to a fair, just and living wage for ALL, not just those who can and will be forced to work extended hours, limiting their input to a good home and family life in exchange for a decent living wage

The FBU focus on this dispute is FAIR PAY and it is important to highlight that this has special significance for women who have entered a non-traditional job and find themselves low paid again. The Fire Service is one area of the public sector that has a majority of male workers, but it suffers from the tradition of low pay established against women workers.

Bain's use of the 'Equality angle' to market this report is outrageous, divisive and completely unfounded as an argument for increasing diversity within the fire service. Bain doesn't offer any genuine way forward to improve the current practices which have a negative impact on women workers and his refusal to consider the real needs of women workers tells us cost comes first and that employers think they can get away with more with women employees. All of this makes us wonder under what terms it wants to recruit new women employees. Equalizing down is certainly not what women consider as an option.

All this, clearly proves to women members, that there is no trick low enough used by our employers and the Government to attempt to smash our National negotiating ability as a trade union, to introduce local working practices, local payments and allowances and local dissolution of the FBU. Women members of the Fire Brigades Union will not allow this to happen under the guise of equality. We stand firm behind our pay claim and will not be used as a tool to cut the fire service.