# Mayor of London pushes ahead with fire station closures

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Mayor of London Boris Johnson has ordered the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) to begin consultation on the Draft London Safety Plan, which will result in the closure of 12 London stations and the loss of 520 jobs beginning in October.

After an earlier move to distance itself from the plan, LFEPA is now to hold an emergency meeting on the closures. LFEPA's 17 members are appointed by the mayor.

London Fire Commissioner Ron Dobson had said that the cuts would go ahead, "hopefully without" compulsory redundancies. Working hand-in-glove with Johnson, he proposed 10 percent in cuts to frontline services. Johnson has indicated his determination to cut jobs, accusing the LFEPA of increasing the likelihood of compulsory redundancies by not tackling the budget gap.

In October last year it was demanded that the London Fire and Rescue Service reduce spending over the next two years by £65 million. This will inevitably involve cuts to frontline services. A number of proposals have been advanced, involving the closure of fire stations, the removal of fire engines and the loss of jobs. None of the proposals advanced so far has made up all the cuts being demanded and would necessarily involve further cutting.

The latest proposal would see 12 stations close, bringing the total across the capital to 100, with a loss of 520 jobs. Seven stations currently equipped with two engines would be cut back to one appliance. Four stations would gain an appliance, meaning a net loss of engines. It is proposed to cut stations in the boroughs of Camden, Tower Hamlets, Lambeth, Islington, Lewisham (two stations), Hackney, Kensington and Chelsea, Newham, Southwark, Westminster, and Greenwich.

Although the debate has so far focused on London, 11 fire stations are under threat in West and South Yorkshire. There are a further 10 proposed closures in Greater Manchester and Merseyside, and more in Berkshire, Hertfordshire, North Yorkshire, Dorset, and Kent.

When the proposals were discussed at the LFEPA, Labour members tabled an amendment deleting all references to station closures, reduction in engine numbers and job losses in future public consultation. This was eventually carried 9-8, with Labour, Green Party and Liberal Democrat members supporting the amendment. But effectively this just passed the decision-making back to Johnson, as there remained a clear commitment to the cuts and the mayor has legal authority to direct the LFEPA in the exercise of its functions.

The London Fire Brigade announced that Dobson would be "discussing with officers what this means in terms of setting the Authority's budget and finding the savings of £45 million that are still needed over the next two years."

Johnson, of course, said that he would simply "ensure" the consultation continued. In a statement he announced that the LFEPA amendments "rendered the Draft Plan unfit for purpose" so he was therefore "directing" LFEPA to being consultation on the Draft Plan within 14 days "so that the implementation of those aspects of the agreed Plan affecting fire stations can be made by October 2013".

As Johnson bluntly told the press, "This consultation will continue as planned. I will be issuing a mayoral directive to ensure it does."

The supposed opposition to Johnson's plan raised on the LFEPA was not politically viable or serious.

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Johnson himself wields executive authority on decision-making. In a telling statement issued by the Mayor's Office, Johnson highlighted the extent of his power, ordering the Authority to follow “my preferred approach”.

Although the Labour amendment claimed it would prevent any of the London fire stations from closing, much like in the Lewisham hospital closure protests the party turns its focus to public relations point-scoring on local issues rather than the broader tactics of austerity—which it fully supports. The last Labour government was responsible for the first devastating wave of National Health Service asset stripping and tendering of public services to private contractors paying lower wages.

The position of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), which staged a demonstration outside the LFEPA meeting, is equally fraudulent. FBU Regional Secretary Paul Embery defended the LFEPA, saying “They were right to reject the cuts at their previous meeting and we think they should do so again. We do not believe they are under any legal obligation to comply with the Mayor’s authoritarian demand.”

The Greater London Authority Act 1999 authorises the mayor to issue specific directions to LFEPA as to the exercise of its functions. The FBU’s response is to tie opposition to the cuts up in legal challenges that will achieve nothing.

Two years ago, Embery insisted that the union had told the Audit Commission there was “no scope” for cuts in frontline services. At the same time, he, along with the FBU, had sabotaged a London-wide strike. Now the FBU has posted an online petition meekly asking the coalition to soften the blow, pleading that it “demands the Government holds true to its election pledge that no front line services will be cut and they halt the closure of any London Fire Station and any job cuts within the London Fire Brigade being imposed by” Johnson. Considering Prime Minister David Cameron's pre-election promise that there would be “no top-down reorganisation of the NHS”, such appeals have no worth.

Austerity opens the floodgates to private enterprise. Just as the coalition and the Labour government before it has done with the NHS, previously public services will be stripped piecemeal and turned into lucrative contracts based on profit. Serco, for example, had earlier been given a contract for training the fire services, while AssetCo was, in 2009, awarded a five year, £12 million contract for frontline fire fighters. At the time the deal was identified by the *Evening Standard* as “£9 million for 700 reserve strike-busting firefighters.”

Johnson so enthusiastically supported privatisation in the same week he attended the opening of a Qatari vanity project, the Shard. With the considerable fire risk it poses, the Shard shares the same borough, Southwark, as one of the proposed station closures. A frontline fire service worker, it should be recalled, told the *Standard* in 2009 that if local fire stations are closed, London can “expect body recovery at best”.

That Johnson can defy public opinion in order to secure millions for his cronies in big business exposes the character of his nominal opponents. It demands the formation of independent strike and action committees to directly confront the cancerous policies of cuts and austerity.

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