

London: Fire station closures endanger lives

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This month has seen the closure of 10 fire stations across London, with the loss of 552 firefighters and 14 fire engines.

The cuts have been forced through by Conservative Party mayor of London, Boris Johnson, in order to achieve budget savings of £45 million over the next two years. This will place extraordinary pressure on the remaining services and increase the risk to the city's population.

As the present cuts account for only £29 million, they mark only a further step in the slashing of social provision.

At every stage, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) has created illusions in the capacity of legal challenges to halt the cuts. Initially the union promoted the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), a body directly under the mayor's authority. It then supported challenges by seven local councils against the legality of the decision-making process. The subsequent ruling by the High Court that Johnson's process was lawful gave a green light for the closures, which have now taken place.

The closure of stations and loss of engines and firefighters is only part of the reduction of service being implemented. Five fire engines will be redeployed to different stations. The number of specialist fire rescue vehicles will be cut from 16 to 14. Alternate crewing arrangements will be introduced at some stations. Numbers of station and group managers will be reduced to 256 initially, aiming ultimately at the figure of 200.

The application for judicial review brought by Islington, Camden, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Lewisham and Greenwich Councils noted the huge anger and concern at the cuts. Firefighters, council officials, the FBU and local residents gave clear evidence that the closures are "reckless and wrong" and "will endanger lives."

The 10 closed stations were located in some of the

most densely populated and fire-endangered London boroughs: Belsize in Camden, Bow in Tower Hamlets, Clerkenwell in Islington, Downham in Lewisham, Kingsland in Hackney, Knightsbridge in Kensington and Chelsea, Silvertown in Newham, Woolwich in Greenwich, Southwark, and Westminster.

These stations have also combined to serve the centre of London. When a ceiling collapsed at a West End theatre last month, injuring more than 70 people, eight fire stations sent engines. Three Westminster, Knightsbridge, and Southwark—have now closed. Clerkenwell and Belsize are two of the oldest fire stations in the capital. Belsize opened in 1915, while Clerkenwell dated back to the 1870s.

The legal challenge was mounted against the Fifth London Safety Plan, which councils argued did not account for the increased fire risk factors in inner London. Welcoming the court ruling, Johnson said he was "pleased" at the legal acceptance of the plan. He called on "all the parties involved" to accept the ruling and work together "to deliver a stable and secure future."

Johnson paid the usual hypocritical tribute to the fire service he had just cut, saying "London's firefighters are the best in the world with incomparable response times. However, we need to continue to modernize the service so that it is fully equipped for the challenges of 21st century fire-fighting." He pointed to his real concerns, saying the Safety Plan "will ensure that there is a balanced budget for 2014/15."

Johnson went on to say that this would mean that "*wherever possible*, compulsory redundancies can be avoided whilst keeping London safe" (emphasis added).

LFEPA chairman James Cleverly has insisted that "Londoners will continue to receive one of the fastest emergency response times in the world." The Safety Plan claims that the London Fire Brigade will maintain

its existing response time of getting “a first fire engine to an emergency within an average six minutes and the second fire engine, if needed, within eight minutes.” It boasts that this is “amongst the fastest target response time of any emergency service in the country and almost twice as fast as some other fire brigades.”

Average response times cannot, of course, remain at these “incomparable” levels following the closures. Residents in six Camden wards are expected to wait an extra minute or more for a fire engine to arrive. Belsize ward will be the hardest hit, with the average waiting time nearly doubling from four minutes 37 seconds to seven minutes 59 seconds. Belsize firefighter Kieron Cashin, a 10-year veteran, described the closure as an “absolute disgrace” that will risk lives.

As a result of previous budget cuts, response time has already increased significantly in England and Wales. In 2008, one in three incidents was responded to in five minutes or less. By 2012 this had fallen to one in six. Going forward, the London Fire Brigade is *aiming* to respond in six minutes with a first vehicle, eight with the second. Requiring a second vehicle would indicate a more serious incident.

Firefighters across the country have confronted cuts in services. Under government plans they are now being forced to work to 60 years of age instead of the current 55 in order to receive their full pension. Anyone made redundant at 55 because they are no longer considered fit could lose up to half their pension. Forcing firefighters to continue in a frontline role puts their lives and those of the public at risk. A recent government review showed that more than half of existing firefighters aged 50 to 54 are unable to meet fire and rescue service standards for frontline jobs, while two-thirds of those aged 55 and over are below standard. Hundreds of firefighters could be sacked on significantly reduced pensions.

The FBU responded by calling a token five-hour walkout on Christmas Eve. This was followed by a six-hour walkout on New Year’s Eve and a two-hour walkout on January 3. They made every effort to ensure services would not be disrupted.

Essex County Fire and Rescue Service (ECFRS) refused to pay striking firefighters on New Year’s Eve. Although it did not lock them out of the stations ECFRS said they were not required to return to work for the remaining nine hours of their shift, and left

resilience crews to cover the 15-hour shift. The local FBU said only that it was “disappointed.”

The anger of firefighters led to the vote in 2004 to disaffiliate from the Labour Party, and the 2005 election of Matt Wrack, a member of the of the so-called “awkward squad” of trade union leaders and supporter of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, as FBU general secretary. This has not changed the character of the union one iota.

Last year FBU Regional Secretary Paul Embery promoted LFEPA as an opponent of Johnson’s proposals. LFEPA, he said, 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 union knew full well that the Greater London Authority Act 1999 authorises the mayor to issue specific directions to LFEPA as to the exercise of its functions, and that he could simply instruct LFEPA. He has now done so.

An important role is played by the union bureaucracy’s adjuncts in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). An article on the pension strikes in the *Socialist Worker* made no mention at all of the impending station closures, praising the FBU’s restricted action as “a series of solid strikes.”

The SWP called on firefighters only to “continue to put pressure on their union leadership to call more strikes.”



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