

Closing 50 ambulance stations proposed

The London Fire Authority has proposed the closure of 50 out of 70 ambulance stations.

The London Ambulance Service would be removed from the National Health Service (NHS) and put under the control of the mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and the London Assembly.

Under the proposals of a “joint working ideas” think tank, ambulance and fire services would then be merged into one building, and the existing premises sold. The plans would cut £50 million from budget expenditure.

The London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA) is led by Conservative Party London Assembly member Brian Coleman, who organised strike-breakers during the 2010 strike of London firefighters. He has not been given direct support from within the London Ambulance Service. Both Chairman Richard Hunt and Chief Executive Peter Bradley have called for the service to remain within the health service. But Bradley has indicated his willingness to examine cost-cutting measures, saying the ambulance service is “not immune to the financial pressures facing the NHS”.

Bradley has argued that “all areas” of the service should be examined for potential savings, and suggests that the housing of services in one building might be an effective means of achieving this, particularly through the merging of back-office staffing, emergency control rooms and shared procurement. “Nearly 80 percent of our budget is spent on staff costs”, he said, and “it will be impossible to make the savings required without removing posts.”

The implications of the proposal for job cuts and destruction of basic healthcare are plain.

The latest proposal comes after calls from the London Assembly for greater cooperation between the London Ambulance Service and City Hall. These include exploring the merger of fire and ambulance stations.

Currently, the ambulance service is operated by an NHS Trust outside City Hall’s control. Citing the US and France, Coleman has alluded to fire and ambulance services working together in other countries. He has suggested this should be achieved under the LFEPA, on the pretext of restoring democratic accountability.

A recent documentary on RT noted that in Los Angeles, in the United States, combining paramedics with the fire service has meant that 82 percent of a firefighter’s time is spent on medical emergencies. A patient is refused emergency department medical attention every 60 seconds because of understaffing and underfunding. Ten hospitals have been closed since 2005, and 500 patients a day are ferried around in emergencies to a shrinking number of hospitals. All are handled by the fire department.

In April 2011, the London Ambulance Service announced the axing of 900 jobs, 560 of which were directly responsible for patient care. This is against a background of a 12 percent rise over four years in the number of ambulance call outs. The service has to deal with 1.5 million emergency calls annually.

The executives of the London Fire Brigade have been tasked with saving money. They are in the midst of privatising training facilities. Amalgamating the services is a gamble they feel they can proceed with, unchallenged by the trade unions. In September 2010, all London's firefighters were threatened with dismissal if they did not sign up to new working conditions. There was a determined mood amongst firefighters striking against the imposition of those conditions, but they were sabotaged by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

FBU leader Matt Wrack, a former member of the Socialist Party who was elected to his post with the support of the Socialist Workers Party, isolated London firefighters from other brigades around the capital and from other groups of workers in dispute. Wrack called off strikes that would have been the first challenge to the new coalition government. He refused to combine firefighters' strikes with London Underground workers on strike over similar attacks on their working conditions.

Bob Crow, general secretary of the Rail Maritime Transport Workers Union (RMT), worked in tandem with Wrack to ensure there would be no joint struggle to defend working conditions.

The following month, Wrack said that he would call off the strikes. All the FBU needed to get back to work, he said, was for the London Fire Brigade to withdraw the dismissal notices and the settlement of other grievances. When Wrack called off a 48-hour strike scheduled for November 5, the Independent described it as "First blood to the coalition".

At the time, Labour Party leader Ed Miliband called the strikes "irresponsible" and encouraged scabbing. As part of a right-wing press campaign against the strikes, the Daily Mail called for mass sackings and for firefighters to be forced into training as emergency ambulance crews in order to slash jobs. This is now the central policy of the Conservative group within the London Assembly.

The policy is already being rolled out. There are three joint fire and ambulance stations across the capital, in Millwall, Acton, and Barnet, where Coleman has served as mayor. Further plans are already in place for joint purchasing and a combined emergency control room for the two services, in line with the comments advanced by executives who are still calling for the London Ambulance Service to remain within the NHS.

This could not have happened without the collaboration of the FBU and UNISON, the main public sector trade union that represents ambulance workers. There is no visible campaign in either trade union against these measures.

The financial elite will also benefit directly from the proposed sale of London Ambulance Service properties for a knockdown price. The disposal of some highly valued real estate will see huge profits being realised by private companies, just as happened with much of the railway property in London. The 70 ambulance stations are worth around £80 million, none of which will be reinvested back into the NHS.

Coleman has previously labelled the London borough of Lambeth councillors irresponsible for opposing the sale of the former Fire Brigade HQ to top-end property developer Native Land. Native Land's executive director Clive Riding advises banks and developers on central London property. The enormous sell-on profits from deals such as these will no doubt be used to finance more highly leveraged gambling on international currency markets.



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