Firefighter solidarity across Europe

The need to maintain and build firefighter solidarity across Europe has not changed following the UK’s departure from the European Union this year. Firefighters made links across borders before the EU was created and firefighters are committed to strengthening those connections, whatever governments and international organisations we live under.

The Fire Brigades Union, which organises firefighters across the UK, advocated remaining in the EU in the 2015 referendum. The FBU’s policy was based on an assessment of the threats to workers’ unity and workers’ rights posed by the Brexit campaign as well as the need to defend specific gains such as rights on working hours (for example, the Working Time Directive), health and safety law (such as the ‘Six Pack’) and other social welfare policies.

The FBU remains committed to continue the vital international solidarity campaigning through the European Federation of Public Services Union (EPSU) firefighters’ network, including the improvement of professional, safety and equipment standards for our occupation in the UK and across Europe. That commitment still stands, despite the UK leaving the EU.

Firefighters across Europe have worked together for many decades. Scandinavian firefighter unions hosted a fire conference in Oslo in May 1946. An international firefighters’ conference was held in London in September 1947. It issued a declaration, arguing that the nature of the job entitled firefighters “to recognition as a highly skilled and professional worker”. The conference demanded shorter working hours and pensions for all firefighters.

Firefighters continued to organise across borders in the following decades. During the 1990s, the European firefighters’ network developed after a series of meetings, spurred on by new health and safety legislation, as well as attacks on public sector fire and rescue services. Our firefighters’ network has met almost annually for three decades – a considerable achievement that has helped firefighters to campaigning for safety standards and resist pressures for deregulation from governments.

The need for firefighter solidarity across Europe has never been greater. Firefighters are on the frontline tackling climate change. Firefighters keep people safe in their homes. Firefighters are on the frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic. Firefighters face common risks such as cancer and the same hazards at work. Firefighters stand shoulder to shoulder on the fire ground and in solidarity across Europe. Our unity is our strength. We pledge to continue to build our dialogue and unity, our common understanding and our common campaigns.