

The crisis of pay determination in the UK fire and police services: a study of modernization and resistance

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Introduction

This paper presents evidence of the pay determination systems for fire fighters and police in the UK. These are the two main occupational groups in the 'emergency' services category. The armed forces are a separate group as are the ambulance staffs. Our focus is on the mechanisms involved, the pressure these came under in recent national disputes (fire fighters in 2002-4, police 2008), and the issues involved in the current debates on modernising and protecting the 'front line' (Bewley 2006).

We start with an account of the institutionalised pay determination systems in the two services, and then through the prism of disputes, debate the issues arising from the tensions between the front line and the modernising impulses of senior managers. At this stage of our research we draw upon existing work and outline plans for new investigations into what is happening on the ground in terms of actual and threatened reforms.

Pay determination in emergency services

Public sector pay determination has been subject to debate and analysis ever since the inception of such services (Fredman and Morris 1989; Corby and White 1999; Bach and Winchester 2003). The debate ranges from those that simply believe that the labour market, as unregulated as possible, should be allowed to determine pay levels in all sectors irrespective of any special need. In contrast others believe that state employees' pay must be controlled and regulated because it is both a major part of public expenditure and thus

impinges on other macro-economic variables, and that the services require a minimum level of staffing to deliver the service level required. In addition, as the state acts as a near monopsony in the cases of some of the key occupations such as all forms of teaching and lecturing, most health professionals, postal workers, social workers, fire fighters and police officers; then the state will be tempted to use its market power to push down wages below an acceptable level (Stiglitz 1986).

But there is the rub. How is the acceptable level to be determined and by whom? Historically most public sector workers belong to their trade union or relevant professional association. Normal forms of collective bargaining as with Whitley in the NHS or local and central government worked well for many years, but broke down due to high rates of inflation leading to both incomes policies that over-ride Whitley and to strikes to rectify anomalies thrown up by such rigid procedures (Seifert 1992; Ironside and Seifert 1995). In addition the citizen user and citizen public tend to expect that teachers, nurses, fire fighters and police are trained to a certain level, can be trusted to do their job well when required, and are therefore properly rewarded. The Priestly Commission (1955) set out clearly both the need for fairness and the temptation for governments using state powers to abuse their strength. Part of that potential abuse of power was to ban strikes in essential services (Morris 1986) -- as now exists for police, prison service, and armed forces -- and to call on the use of troops to cover during strikes (Peak 1984; Kerr and Sachdev 1991).

Since then three methods for determining public sector pay in the UK have persisted side by side. Forms of Whitley continue to exist in local government, central government agencies, for lecturers, and in the Post Office. Pay Review Bodies, themselves not identical, now exist for schoolteachers, health professionals, prison officers, and a range of smaller groups such as the armed forces and senior public sector workers such as judges (White 2000; White and Hatchett 2003). The third group include the police and fire: both have a form of indexation – in the fire service this is based on a formula with automatic upgrading (Seifert and Sibley 2005); while for the police it is embedded within a form of bargaining through the Police National Board (Hunter 2003). A major difference explored below is that in the fire service most fire fighters belong to the Fire Brigades Union (FBU), an independent TUC-affiliated trade union with the right to strike, while police belong to the Police Federation of England

and Wales (PFEW), which is not a trade union and has no right to strike.

Establishing Fair Pay:

1. Police Officers

There are 142,000 of police officers and 82,000 non-uniform staff in England and Wales grouped within 43 forces. Each force, except in London, is under the control of the relevant Police Authority, itself a subset of the Local Authority. In London the Metropolitan force comes directly under the Home Office. The uniform side are ranked in familiar form from Constable, through Sergeants, Inspectors, and Superintendents, to Chief Constable. Their status and duties are largely covered by Statute, including their requirement to belong to the PFEW and that they have no right to strike. Their duties are familiar to most citizens, and are grouped into three national priorities: terrorism, serious and organised crime, and neighbourhood. The latter tends to be when most citizens come across the police. Recently police officers have been accompanied by a new grade of 16,000 Community Support Officers who are not police, and are covered by the usual local government terms and conditions of employment and bargaining machinery. This civilianisation process is widely contested as part of the government's so-called modernization programme.

Prior to 1919 each Police Force determined pay for police officers locally. In 1919 the famous strike by police forced the Government of the day to ban strikes but in so doing they were also forced to find a way to determine pay and conditions that would be acceptable to police and public. The strike in London by police over union recognition was part of a wider strike movement, and as AJP Taylor ironically notes "the strikes were not only alarming in themselves --- particularly the unparalleled display of working-class feeling by the guardians of public order" (1965: 106).

From 1919 to 1980 a Whitley Council approach was adopted. Two statutory Police Councils were established, one for England and Wales and the other for Scotland. In each case, representatives from the Official (Employer) Side and Staff Side provided advice on police pay and conditions to the Secretaries of State who had overall responsibility for determining police officer pay. The Whitley Council approach continued to operate for over 50 years with a number of independent reviews (Randall 2006; Booth 2007; Song 2008). The main

ones included the Desborough Committee (1919) which recommended a unified approach to pay, pensions and conditions and introduced a national pay scale based on length of service. As is usual the reforms came as a response to threats of strike action by the National Union of Police and Prison Officers. The resultant Police Act of 1919 outlawed strikes and the union, and established the Police Federation as the sole legitimate collective voice of police officers in what became known as the federated ranks.

The Oaksey Review of police conditions of service (1953) recommended a non-statutory negotiating body for the police, and proposed the creation of a new Police Council with an independent Chair and joint secretariats established by each side. This was a genuine looking negotiating body responsible for making recommendations on pay, allowances, expenses, hours and leave. This was supplemented by Advisory Boards dealing with non-negotiable matters such as training and discipline.

In 1958 the Government announced the appointment of a Royal Commission chaired by Sir Henry Willink, and it was not until the Police Act 1964, which was the vehicle for the implementation of many of the recommendations of the Royal Commission, that the new Police Council and the Police Advisory Boards secured their statutory authority (Randall 2006:10). Crucially the Commission recommended a pay negotiation formula to recognise the fact that police had no right to strike. However as Song (2008) notes: "By the mid 1970s negotiating arrangements became severely strained, at a time of high inflation and over-riding government pay limits, culminating in the Police Federation withdrawing from the Police Council. An Inquiry into the police negotiating machinery was established in 1978 following a dispute over police pay in 1976 – 1977, which led to a breakdown of the traditional machinery, under the chairmanship of Lord Edmund-Davies." This recommended the establishment of the Police Negotiating Board in its present form, with a Chair and deputy independent of the sides. The role of the Chair was to "provide continuity and to supply a neutral voice in negotiation". An independent secretariat was also introduced to provide knowledge and expertise. The independent secretariat met one of the criticisms made by the Police Federation of the former arrangements. Under these, although the secretaries of each side had supposedly equal status, forces tended to turn to the official side secretariat for guidance. Now, there was a mechanism to provide guidance on a neutral

or agreed basis. The PNB was established formally by the Police Negotiating Board Act 1980, subsequently consolidated in the Police Act 1996. (Randall 2006:11)

Edmund-Davies addressed specifically the relationship between the machinery of negotiation and the absence of the right to strike. The report said: "Such an important limitation on the freedom of action of members of the police force renders it even more essential that the machinery for determining police pay and other conditions of service commands the confidence of all sections of the service." (Randall 2006:11). This follows the precepts of the more general Priestley report (1955) into the basis of fair pay in the state sector.

At the heart of the Edmund Davies Inquiry was the proposed indexing of Police Officers' pay to movements in the Average Earnings Index for the whole economy. The index was modified in 1984 when the underlying index of average earnings was substituted. A further change arose from the 1993 Sheehy Report into Police Responsibilities and Rewards to examine the rank structure, remuneration and conditions of police service, which recommended a link to pay settlements rather than average earnings and proposed using the OME survey of private sector non-manual settlements data, which was widely used at the time to inform negotiations on the pay of civil servants. Consequently, from 1994 the OME figure for the median of total pay settlements has been used to determine the annual police pay uplift.

From 1994 police base pay adjustments have been linked to the median total pay increase in a sample of private sector organisations surveyed by the OME. However, by 2005 the police service was the sole user of the index and in that year the OME indicated that, in the light of concerns about the technical robustness of the survey and the validity of the data produced, it could not recommend continued use of the survey. This mirrors concerns among fire fighters that led to their dispute in 2002-4 over the nature and form of indexation (Seifert and Sibley 2005, 2010).

The Police Arbitration Tribunal (PAT) supplements this process because Police officers are prohibited by statute from striking. Under the Constitution of the Police Negotiating Board,

therefore, matters on which no agreement can be reached, and which cannot be resolved by conciliation, may be referred by either Side to arbitration. Pension matters are, however, not arbitrable.

In 2007/8 there was an unusually vocal and demonstrative response by the PFEW to the decision by the then Home Secretary to phase the recommended pay increase. As early as 14th January 2008 the House of Commons expressed real concern over government policy to stage the PNB pay recommendation. The Home Secretary was attacked from all sides after effective briefings by the PFEW to MPs. Jacqui Smith replied:

“... we are keen, on an ongoing basis, to discuss with the Police Federation and all other representatives of police staff the wide range of work that we can do both to recognise the important contribution that they make, as we do day in and day out, and to move forward on the issue of police pay, as I have outlined. I have been clear in the explanation that I and the Government have given for the staging of the police pay award this year. The recommendation from the police arbitration tribunal was for me to consider; it was, effectively, the same as a recommendation from the police negotiating board. I had a responsibility to make a decision that was right for policing, for the affordability of policing and for the taxpayer. It was also right that that decision should be in line with the publicly stated pay policy and the Government's commitment to keep inflation under control.” (Hansard, 14/1/2008).

And again she said,

“there are a range of issues involved in the decision that I made, and one of them is certainly affordability. It is the case that £1 allocated to policing cannot be spent twice. The point to which my right hon. Friend the Minister of State referred was simply that £40 million is the equivalent of the retention of 800 police officers. That is not an unreasonable point to make when one is making a case about the Government's pay policy, fairness to all public sector workers and affordability for police budgets as a whole.” (ibid.)

The government's position was further reinforced when on 23rd of January the PM said in the Commons: “As far as the police are concerned, there has been a 39 per cent. rise in

police pay over the last 10 years. People understand that in the fight against inflation it was necessary to stage public sector pay awards. I would like to have given the police more. I would like to have given the nurses more, and more to other public sector workers who found that their wages were staged. But if pay rises are wiped out by ever-rising inflation, no benefit will go to the police or anybody else who receives those pay rises."

On the same day an estimated 22,500 police officers marched in central London in a protest over their pay. The Guardian reported: "Police are angry that a 2.5% pay rise was only backdated to 1 December for UK officers except for those in Scotland. Prime Minister Gordon Brown said he would have liked to pay more but it was part of the "fight against inflation". Police Federation chairman Jan Berry held "constructive" talks with the home secretary, but said trust between the two sides needed to be rebuilt. Police say the rise is effectively a 1.9% annual increase - unlike that in Scotland, where it has been backdated to 1 September" (23/1/2008).

A rally at Central Hall in Westminster, consisting of 3,500 officers, was followed by Ms Berry (Chairman of the PFEW) presenting a petition to Downing Street and meeting with the home secretary. Ms Berry said of the meeting with Ms Smith: "She did listen and the talks were certainly more constructive than my last meeting with her, which I would describe as being pretty acrimonious." She added: "We recognise that we need to move on at some stage but what we pointed out to the home secretary is that the 25,000 police officers who came to London today and those left behind who were doing their duty, there's still some unfinished business for how we've been treated. And for us to be able to enter into negotiations in the future, we've got to trust the people that we're going to be negotiating with. And that trust is going to have to be rebuilt because it's been broken." She told MPs at a meeting in the House of Commons that the federation filed documents applying for a judicial review on 22 January.

Later in the year The Guardian (14/8/08) again reported: "Police call to action after pay talks collapse. The Police Federation yesterday called on its 140,000 members to in effect work to rule after talks broke down in a bitter pay row. The federation's chairman Paul McKeever called on rank-and-file members to conform strictly to their conditions of employment after

discussions broke down in the long-running pay dispute which saw more than 20,000 officers march on Westminster in January". He called on his members to "secure your full entitlements" but stopped short of describing the move as a work-to-rule because police can be prosecuted for taking industrial action. In a letter to members, McKeever said: "You should be aware of your rights so as to ensure that you secure your full entitlements, as well as being aware of the obligations of your chief officer and police authority under those regulations and determinations. Our members, together with chief officers and police authorities, are expected to comply with their obligations under the police regulations and determinations. This is particularly so when police officers are dissatisfied with the way we are being treated by the government."

The organisation said it would be sending police a simple guide to their terms and conditions. Police officers are banned from going on strike, but at their conference in May 2008 an overwhelming majority voted to press for full industrial rights. A work-to-rule is expected to affect willingness to work overtime. Officers protested over last year's decision to introduce a 2.5% pay rise in stages, reducing its value to 1.9%. Latest negotiations this year (2009) ended with a 2.325% government offer against a 3.5% demand from the federation. A spokeswoman for the official side of the police negotiating board, which represents the Home Office, said: "The official side offered the police a three-year pay deal, which was one of the most generous in the public sector. Regrettably, they rejected it. That is why we were forced to offer a one-year deal."

The deal that ended this round of dispute was simple enough:

- ☐ 2.65% with effect from 1 September 2008
- ☐ 2.6 % with effect from 1 September 2009
- ☐ 2.55% with effect from 1 September 2010

With Constables' pay on service commencement rising from £21,534 in September 2007 to £23,259 by September 2010; and for those on point 10 of the scale (the top) it moves from £33,810 to £36,519. For sergeants at the bottom of the scale it goes from £33,810 to £36,519, and for those at the top (point 4) from £37,998 to £41,040. For inspectors and chief inspectors (outside London) it ranges from the lowest point for inspectors of £43,320 to £46,788 by 2010; to the best paid chiefs of £49,923 to £53,919. These are the ranks covered

by the PFEW and the PNB, but clearly the pay of superintendents and chief constables is subject to differentials and similar pay upgrades, and this is without a range of allowances and overtime.

As a result of the day of action and spat with the Home Secretary further light was shed on pay systems and mechanisms for the police forces of England and Wales:

“The Government’s policy on pay applies to the police as to other public sector groups. In their written evidence, the Home Office set out their criteria for an effective machinery to determine pay and conditions consistent with the Government’s current public sector pay policy. The Home Office evidence also notes that effective pay systems should be flexible—the ability to reflect a wide range of factors and changing circumstances. The Government view is that the current indexation arrangements do not meet these objectives and are essentially contrary to economic policy, which is underpinned by flexible labour markets and the exposure of each workforce or organisation to its own set of market considerations. The Government go on to reason that if a large section of the UK workforce were to have their pay rises indexed to the pay rises of other workers, this would severely undermine macroeconomic flexibility, which has been the cornerstone of the UK’s economic success in the last decade. Finally, the Government argue that indexation delivers an automatic award, thereby removing the incentives for workforce reform and efficiency improvements.” (Booth 2007)

Booth suggested that one of the options is to devise a strictly temporary form of indexation that is fair to all parties, and, in particular, that ensures that the police are treated in line with the generality of public sector workers. In the short term a link to public sector settlements meets these objectives by: taking account of the Government’s pay policy for the public sector (to the extent that other public sector awards reflect this policy); reflecting in a general way the public sector affordability constraint; maintaining police pay relativities with the rest of the public sector; clearly being of only temporary duration until a new process for determining police pay is determined after part two of this review. Any uprating mechanism should be simple, objective, transparent, based on timely information, and follow rather than lead the market. A very simple approach is suggested, based purely on

the basic pay settlement figure, namely, the basic revalorisation that applies to the pay scale of the majority of staff or the largest group.

In 2007 the PFEW decided it preferred the current indexation system to any proposed pay review as outlined in the Booth Report (2007). As a result they adopted a policy based on a critique of pay review bodies because:

“on balance, the government has gained more from PRBs than the parties in terms of process and outcomes, and that generally the employers have done better, especially since the mid-1990s, than the staff side” and that “PRBs have become increasingly an instrument of direct government control over pay and conditions of service; and that at the moment they are being used to introduce some of the government’s ‘modernization’ objectives. These include the move to local pay and performance pay, the change in skill mix associated with ‘civilianisation’, and a more flexible approach to labour management that may re-introduce police force mergers in some form” (Seifert 2007).

When there is relatively low inflation the predicted outcomes in terms of pay awards tend to be similar whatever the actual pay setting mechanism. So those public sector workers covered by PRBs have achieved the same pattern of pay increases as those covered by Whitley-style national collective bargaining, and those for police and fire fighters. The real difference tends to come either when inflation starts to rise rapidly, or in the use of pay supplements at local employer level (Hunter 2003; Seifert 2007).

In addition there is a political side to pay review for the parties, namely, the relative position of the parties in terms of the staff side being able to effectively represent their members’ interests, and the employers being able to deliver on agreements throughout the country. As such it matters that one is seen to be involved matters, and seen to be able to fight one’s corner. Those organizations involved with PRB benefit from the institutional formalisation of the arrangements and the high profile reporting of outcomes, but increasingly suffer from lack of member interest, a loss of accountability, and of accusations of being too close to government and the employers.

2. Fire service:

The Fire and Rescue Service is divided into county groups each under the control of the Fire Authority which is part of the Local Authority. Fire fighters are ranked in a uniform-based system from Chief Fire Officer down, and are subject to quasi-military discipline, now being phased out and replaced by more standard employment rights. There are 30,000 fire fighters, 12,000 retained fire fighters, 1500 control room staff, and 8,000 non-uniform staff in England and Wales, and most of these are full-time, with some part-time (retained) staff in country areas. The main tasks of the service remain the prevention and fighting of fires, floods, terrorist attacks, and road accidents. Much of this is now based on risk assessment in terms of where fire engines are based, and what shifts are fully staffed. After the 1977 strike (Bailey 1992) WEJ McCarthy developed a pay index system whereby fire fighters' pay was directly linked to the upper quartile of male manual earnings in the rest of the economy. This was to prevent further national strikes while retaining the right to strike for the workforce. Other conditions of service are negotiated in a Whitley-style NJC with the FBU as the main representative of the staffs.

Throughout the 1990s the pay formula began to look out of date, and alongside numerous local disputes over staffing levels and union rights, a crisis brew up in the late 1990s (Burchill 2000). This culminated in a bitter and long drawn national fire strike 2002-4 (Burchill 2004; Nolda 2004; Seifert and Sibley 2010). At the end of which a new formula was agreed on the basis that there would be changes in working practices along the lines of the modernization programme.

The genesis of the 2002 pay claim that resulted in the 2002-4 dispute offers some understanding into the nature of the union and its democratic governance. In the early 1990s there had been growing evidence of deteriorating industrial relations at all levels within the service (Darlington 1997; Fitzgerald & Stirling 1999). This took the form of a series of local disputes (Merseyside 1995, 2001; Derbyshire 1995/6; Essex 1997/8; Berkshire 2000), exacerbating bad feeling and low trust. With efforts locally and nationally by employers to break free from both the national collective bargaining system and its national conditions of service, there had been a stalemate in national bargaining in the late 1990s.

A stream of employer initiatives had been met with variable opposition from local FBU branches. Most concerned very specific changes in the management of the workforce, but the overall pattern was one of redefining the management-union relationship (Audit Commission 1995; Employers' Organisation 2001, 2002; Her Majesty's Fire Service Inspectorate 2001).

The Fire Service at the time had a national indexed pay formula, with other conditions of service determined through the National Joint Council (NJC), a Whitley-style system, and set out in the Grey Book of national agreements (Bain 2002). At local level the employer was the Fire Authority, part of the Local Authority, and they negotiated through the Chief Fire Officer (CFO) with the local FBU officials on local issues and implementation of national agreements. In essence this meant that it was very difficult for the employers to bargain for change, modernization, because they had nothing to offer. As a result there were tensions between central government which paid about 85% of the fire service bills and wanted change, and employers unable to agree amongst themselves due to long-standing political and geographical differences and unable to force the FBU to embark on a something-for-something deal. Part of the government's agenda was to centralize services under Whitehall rule in order to push through their version of modernization, and maintain central authority over local labour management decisions.

Since the settlement of the first national fire fighters' strike in 1977/8 (Bailey 1992; FBU1997a), FBU members' pay had been determined by a pay formula linking annual increases to changes in the upper quartile of skilled male manual workers' earnings (FBU 1997b; LRD 1996; Incomes Data Service 2002, b). This formula worked well until the mid-1990s when it became clear that a mixture of deindustrialisation in the economy as a whole and job development in the Fire Service itself resulted in fire fighters' earnings falling steadily behind the average male industrial wage while their job content and productivity rate increased substantially. By the late 1990s disquiet was being vociferously expressed by rank and file delegates at union conferences. With the election of the second Blair government in 2001 the union leadership judged it to be politically expedient to shape rank and file demands to build a pay campaign. By early 2002 the union leadership was ready for a major pay campaign reflecting the pent up demands of the membership. At its May 2002

conference the delegates debated an emergency resolution on pay: “the fire service national pay formula [has become] less effective in delivering a reasonable living wage to those who render a vital emergency service to our communities. Simultaneously the jobs of fire fighters and emergency fire control staff have become increasingly complex and skilled and this should be reflected in their wages” (FBU 2002 Annual Report; 97).

Based on the views and expectations expressed during a membership consultation exercise the Executive Committee (EC) drew up its set of demands. The union leadership commissioned independent reports to assess the pay situation. The first report on the pay formula itself indicated that a rise of 21% was needed simply to restore the fire fighters’ position in the wages’ league to that enjoyed in 1979 (the first year of the formula) while the number of call outs per employee had increased by 50% since 1992 (LRD 2002). The second looked into the rate for the job of a modern fire fighter (Hastings 2002) and showed that the job content had changed substantially since 1979: this element alone warranted a 16% increase. Fire fighters were no longer just manual workers involved in dangerous and socially essential jobs, but were now technicians requiring computer skills and the ability to communicate the fire safety message to all sections of the community from schools to housing estates. The national union leadership was clear as Andy Gilchrist, FBU general secretary 2000-5, explained in interview that his intention was always to negotiate a settlement for his members. He denied that any strike would either be the start of some ‘summer of discontent’ or aimed at bringing down a Labour government. So the explicit political case was clear: the union proclaimed this to be a simple industrial dispute.

The FBU’s claim had three main elements: pay rate parity for its members thus removing the long-standing discrimination against part-time retained fire fighters and the mainly female staff operating the emergency call centres; a new pay formula linking future earnings growth to that of associate professional and technician grades rather than skilled manual workers; and an increase from £21,500 to £30,000 for full-time fire fighters after completion of four years on the job training. In the event the principle of equal pay for control room operators and part-time retained fire fighters was conceded early on in the negotiations. The sticking point for the employers and the government was the claim for a basic full-time rate of £30,000 per annum equivalent to a 39% increase.

Meanwhile central government had been pressurising Fire Authorities with the support of most Chief Fire Officers to introduce some elements of the modernization package. As elsewhere there was concern to change structures, finances and accountability under the umbrella of New Public Management (Hood 1995), but as with other labour-intensive locally-delivered services the main changes had to be in labour management and control of labour costs (Ironsides and Seifert 2004). This had been difficult in the Fire Service despite fitful efforts by some employers because of bitter divisions within the employers, the ambiguous role of central government which crucially provided nearly 85% of monies, and the national bargaining arrangements by which pay was decided automatically by a formula while conditions of service were negotiated through a Whitley-style NJC (Burchill 2000; 7-9).

Discussion of the issues

The principles that govern public sector pay are the same as elsewhere: the unions favour fair comparison based on both other workers' pay and in terms of the cost of living; in contrast employers, including the government, emphasise labour market conditions, productivity, and affordability. Comparability has had a mixed history with its formalisation in the Clegg Commission of the late 1970s and early 1980s, its formal abandonment by the Conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s, and its partial restoration since then. The Pay Review Body remits speak of pay levels sufficient to recruit and retain the right mix of qualified staff within affordable limits. The principles, however, tend to become muddled by government purposes: to prevent strike action which may be politically harmful; to secure the lowest possible total pay bill; and to minimise the use of collective bargaining, and therefore union involvement, in modernization programmes.

The implementation of this set of purposes and principles across the UK public sector has meant high levels of job security, negotiated conditions of service, relatively lower pay; traditionally more secure and better pensions; and some limited voice for staff. Much of this has been eroded in the civil service, local government, and parts of the NHS. For the police and fire services, so far, job security and pensions have been reasonably secure; staff voice has been increasingly lost; while pay has been held steady and subject to fierce resistance. The real tensions have been over a range of items covered by modernization. In the fire

service this has involved shift patterns, staffing levels, training, and as always safety. In the police this has meant worries about the role of the CSOs, opposition to mergers, and concerns over overtime, safety, and public scrutiny.

In both cases the workforce and their representative bodies make the link between pay levels, pay determination mechanisms, and negotiated, rather than imposed, change in working practices. Part of this is caught up in their views, and the increasingly politicised views of others, about the importance of 'front line' staff. This is itself part of the debate about the impact of New Public Management on the labour process of staff involved. The case is made that for the police and fire services to be more efficient, that is for the labour problem to be resolved, then senior managers need more control over all resources, and labour resources in particular. This requires a reduction in the power of workforce representatives to resist unwanted changes; the Taylorisation of working practices through a range of initiatives often government-inspired but given substantive detail by the relevant Royal Inspectorates; and carried out by a new breed of local senior managers responsive upwards to government ministers rather than sensitive to the concerns of their own staff and the stated needs of the wider community. So effective policing and fire fighting is a poor second to the efforts to be more efficient and economic.

Our interest lies with the ways in which these complex set of debates manifest in the labour process of those working in the emergency services. This paper has sought to contextualise the contested nature of pay determination and the subsequent tensions that have surfaced between the so-called front line and the senior managers' modernizing imperative. Current political discussion reveals a preoccupation with "protecting the front line" while reducing public sector spending but less attention is given to what we mean by "front line" work in emergency services. There are potentially fundamental contradictions within this general debate: on the one hand senior managers are tasked with delivering efficient, modernized services that satisfy politicians and of course citizen users that front line services are both protected and affordable; on the other hand modernising impulses by necessity involve enhanced management controls over costs, labour costs included, and task performance – this is evident in the increasingly civilianisation of both the fire and police services as managers have sought to create a new division of labour that delivers cost savings and

refined, more manageable performance remits for each category of worker. Here lies the problem: the essence of front line work in a military sense implies low levels of close supervision but this is at odds with the modernizing agenda where skills mix changes and attendant supervision and performance target and measurement regimes abound.

Further contradictions and complications are to be found in the notion of the front line worker debate itself. The nature of front line work in the emergency services generally carries with it notions of heroism and bravery but this masks the diverse nature of such front line work: for example a fire-fighter engaged in fire safety work with local schools may experience a rather different labour process from that involved when putting out a fire or when dealing with the consequences of a serious road traffic incident. Community Support Officers may in practice do the job of a “bobby on the beat” but are not imbued with the same powers to deal with problems as police officers. Our point is that there needs to be a much sharper conceptualisation of the nature of the front line labour process and how it is explained and experienced: how do front line workers in the emergency services actually see themselves? Is heroics part of the labour process and how does this relate to the increasing civilianisation of front line emergency services’ work? What are the duties, tasks and management controls that constitute front line work? How are these related to considerations about pay levels, pay determination and perceptions of fair comparability?

Our research aims to build upon this context and presented body of evidence, and seeks to investigate the ways in which ‘front line’ staff are defined and delineated, if their jobs and tasks are genuinely protected from other cut backs, and the extent to which the loss over their labour process means a worse service for the citizen user. We have access to undertake primary research in two counties, one metropolitan and one rural. Our main method involves six case studies and relies on detailed interviews of a cross-section of those working in each service. It is our intention to interview representatives of each category /grade of worker in each service and at each level. This approach will enable us to surface the debates as actually experienced and enacted by those working on the so called front line as a means for moving towards a clearer conceptualisation of what is an undeniably important but somewhat muddled debate.

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