

Police vote to demand right to strike fails

A police ballot to demand the right to strike failed yesterday because just four in 10 officers went online to vote.



The Home Secretary told officers that the option of the right to strike is “off the table” Photo: PA

By Wesley Johnson, Home Affairs Correspondent

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The survey of 133,000 rank-and-file officers showed 45,651 in favour and 10,681 against.

The results followed warnings that a low turnout would leave the national federation looking weak ahead of future negotiations with the Government over compulsory redundancies.

A majority of the federation’s entire membership, around 65,000, needed to vote in favour of the campaign if the ballot was to be successful.

While 81% of those who voted were in favour, that represented just 34% of all officers.

Steve Williams, the federation’s chairman, said: "A significant proportion of our membership has indicated that they want the right to take industrial action.

“This highlights the pressures currently felt by rank and file officers throughout England and

Wales.

"However, it would not be appropriate to undertake a course of action that could potentially change the employment status of more than 133,000 police officers if fewer than half of those officers have voted for us to do so."

But he dismissed suggestions that the federation was now left looking weak.

"I disagree with that completely, it's certainly not a sign of weakness," he said.

"I felt it was important that we set that threshold of 50% before campaigning for any changes.

"It is only right and proper that the threshold was set so high before trying to change the terms and conditions of service for all officers."

He went on: "Our members value their unique employment status as servants of the crown (the Office of Constable), and I believe the vast majority of them would view industrial action as a last resort.

"However, the significant number that voted in favour of the right to take industrial action have done so in response to the reforms and changes to policing which are being proposed and implemented by the government, and the impact those changes are having on officers' ability to do their jobs and on their morale."

Mr Williams also insisted the vote sent an "interesting message to government" over officers' anger and frustration over force budget cuts of 20%, changes to pay and conditions, and the threat of compulsory severance being brought in.

Suggested reforms include cutting pay for new police constables by £4,000 to £19,000, as well as a fast-track scheme to allow constables to rise to the rank of inspector in just three years, while foreign candidates could be able to apply for chief constable roles for the first time.

It is illegal for officers to take industrial action and the last official strike was believed to be almost a century ago in 1919.

Theresa May, the Home Secretary, told officers last year that the right to strike was "off the table".

Damian Green, the Policing Minister, said: "I am pleased the vast majority of police officers do not want the right to strike - their work is too important.

"Our police have done a fantastic job to cut crime by 10% over the first two years of this Government, despite having to play their role in cutting the country's record deficit.

"The federation has a key role to play in driving our reforms on improving professionalism and leadership across all ranks and I look forward to working closely with them in the future."

But John Tully, chairman of the federation's Met branch, said in any other organisation the result "would have been regarded as a clear mandate for action".

The 50% plus one threshold was "unachievable" and effectively "ruled that officers who chose to abstain would be deemed to have voted 'no'".

He said: "Under this bizarre logic, there would be no Police and Crime Commissioners because only about 15 per cent of the electorate bothered to vote them, not to mention MPs elected at low-turnout by elections.

"But they, of course, were chosen under the rules which govern any normal election."

He went on: "The Metropolitan Police Federation is appalled that this clear mandate from the membership is simply being ignored.

"Of those Met Federation members who participated, a resounding 93 per cent voted in favour of seeking industrial rights.

"They will rightly demand to know under what agenda our national leaders have chosen to ignore a legitimate mandate for seeking industrial rights for police officers."