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UNITED FIREFIGHTERS UNION OF AUSTRALIA TASMANIAN BRANCH ANNUAL REPORT 12 DECEMBER 2001

1. Introduction

The period since my last annual report has been eventful and has seen a strengthening of the position of the Union. It is pleasing to be able to say that our approach to the current round of enterprise bargaining has been far more united than in previous years.

The financial position of the Union is again very strong and membership numbers have shown stability.

This AGM is later than usual due to some disruption in the staffing arrangements at the office of Michael Spencer Accountants & Business Consultants. My understanding is that these difficulties have been resolved and that we should not see similar delays next year.

2. Enterprise Bargaining

The 2001 EBA has been the major undertaking for the year. In April 2001 we somewhat optimistically wrote to the Tasmania Fire Service seeking early negotiations. A lot of work had already been done prior to that point however.

Much water has gone under the bridge since that time, and recent developments suggest that we are reaching a point where the Government is at last giving consideration to making a revised offer to us.

Preparation

The first step in preparing for the 2001 EBA was the Bronte Park Union Workplace Representatives Conference held in November last year. A wide range of matters were discussed, but a key item was the development of a means by which members could know precisely what was going on at each stage of the negotiations as they developed. A decision was therefore taken at the conference to develop a communication strategy.

The New Year saw the first publication of the Firefighters Guide to Enterprise Bargaining. The preparation of this document took an enormous amount of work. It is intended to be a reference for Union Workplace Representatives in particular.

The return of the coalition Government in Canberra means that this document will have to be revised due to expected changes to the legislation.

EBA Policy and Communication strategy

The first of the general meetings of the year saw the adoption of our policy on negotiating and voting arrangements for the 2001 EBA. The communication strategy that was suggested at Bronte Park was also drafted and ultimately adopted. The key element in this strategy was the production of EBA memorandums that were circulated to Union Workplace Representatives to their home addresses immediately after each significant negotiation session. This strategy appears to have been successful.

Shift meetings

The shift meetings that took place last year and early this year were another successful part of the process. Discussion amongst members in small groups outside the pressure of General Meetings is a very effective way of ensuring that people know what is going on.

Claim

As a result of this process of consultation and discussion we gave notice of our initiation of a bargaining period on 25 May 2001. Our very modest claim of three million dollars was justified on the basis that similar sorts of increases had been negotiated for Police and Ambulance on a per head basis.

Negotiations

Negotiations finally commenced in July 2001 and what followed was a couple of fairly unproductive months. This led to an offer being made on 21 September 2001 that was soundly rejected by members in FireComm and Operations. It is important to note that an absolute majority of members attended meetings at the time and rejected the first offer.

Publicity

We have had a pretty good run with publicity with the front page of The Examiner in relation to aerial appliances, and the front page of The Advocate in advance of the rally being the stand out items. The support of the Leader of the Opposition for our wage claim and the television reporting on the question of the stolen 2% were also most gratifying.

Rally

The media coverage of the rally held on 24 October 2001 was solid, with the TV coverage perhaps being better than the newspapers. The rally itself will long be remembered by many as a very successful and rewarding exercise. Perhaps most importantly, we achieved an immediate result in having the Minister for Industrial Relations take over the negotiations.

Settlement?

It is pleasing to be able to report that as a consequence of discussions over the past week it is likely that a significantly revised and enhanced offer will be forthcoming from the Government in the near future. The acceptance or rejection of this offer by members will be the subject of general meetings and most probably a secret ballot. Even if it isn't good enough for members to accept, there can be no doubt that this offer will be a lot better than what was on the table prior to the rally.

3. Other MattersWorkplace Representatives

It is extremely pleasing to be able to report that we now have a much more well established system of elected representatives in TFS workplaces than probably at any time in the past.

Union Workplace Representatives

The spill of Union Workplace Representative positions that occurred after the most recent Branch elections has led to much wider representation on shifts and in workplaces. Work is being undertaken in concert with Unions Tasmania to provide a system of training to help support our Union Workplace Representatives.

Workplace OH&S Representatives

We have also achieved the election of Workplace OH&S Reps in all areas followed by their official accreditation and training under the Workplace Health and Safety Act. The latter part of this exercise was very bureaucratic and time consuming.

Thanks once again to Jeremy Smith for his sterling efforts in achieving these outcomes.

Competency recognition

A major undertaking for the year has been the culmination of our four-year struggle to achieve a competency recognition system. In the end Workplace Standards Tasmania had to place an order on the Chief Officer of the TFS to achieve this outcome. The fact that this happened was a clear vindication of our arguments on this issue. At the same time it demonstrated that the priorities of the Chief Officer, at least on this occasion, were out of step with both OH&S law and the practical realities of life.

Financial and membership

The financial performance of the Branch has again been strong. The audited accounts show that we have upgraded the union vehicle and still turned a net profit of \$5,139.00. In addition a significant proportion of our surplus has been invested in accordance with member's wishes and increased interest has been forthcoming as a result.

It is extremely pleasing to note that many new employees in the industry have already shown a strong commitment to the union. There has probably been a 25% turnover in operational staff over recent years, but at the same time our membership levels have remained strong.

The future

The Union Workplace Representatives Conference held at Bronte Park in 2000 was highly successful and we are looking at another conference in March 2002.

The return of the Coalition Government in Canberra will see a fresh attempt to change the Workplace Relations Act 1996. Their success or otherwise in this exercise will depend on the attitude of the Greens and Independents in the Senate.

Members are also asked to note that the idea of returning to the state industrial relations jurisdiction may still be a possibility.

As foreshadowed at recent general meetings, the introduction of the public safety training package will present us with challenges. Not the least of these will be the fact that under this system it is intended that volunteer Firefighters will be recognised as having some of the same competencies as professional Firefighters.

Members will have noted that a number of Officer vacancies have recently been advertised. Although these positions are outside rostered shift work, the promotions will be recognised for all operational purposes. The issues that arise from this are ones we must come to terms with in the near future. Coupled with this we must also give consideration to the impediments that appear to be preventing people from applying for positions in non-rostered shift work areas. Part of this process will necessarily include the completion of the work of the Training Services and Rural Operations Career Path Working Parties.

4. Conclusion

As a final note I wish to express my thanks to Wayne Seabrook, Leon Dewhurst, Jeremy Smith, the Branch Committee of Management and most importantly of all Kae Jones for running a sound ship.