

UNITED FIREFIGHTERS UNION OF AUSTRALIA

TASMANIAN BRANCH

ANNUAL REPORT 2004

3 December 2004

GENERAL

The past year will rightly be remembered as one of the most important in the history of the Tasmanian Branch of the UFU of A.

Members can justifiably feel proud of their participation in the UFU and the benefits that have been won since the last Branch Annual Report.

Membership

Membership increased during the year from 323 at 30 June 2003 to 333 at 30 June 2004.

This is pleasing given the fact that 2004 was not a recruit course year.

The increase can be explained by an expansion in numbers in TasFire Equipment, the employment of a number of experienced firefighters and the resignation of a few long standing non unionists.

Financial

The financial position of the Branch for the year was again very positive given that the union vehicle was exchanged and the Branch held another very successful (but expensive) two day conference of Branch Committee of Management members, Union Workplace Representatives and Employee Safety Representatives.

This strong financial position is primarily due to the very sound management practices of the Branch Committee of Management and increased revenues from membership subscriptions arising from the pay increases won in the Millennium Agreement.

The Branch Committee of Management has already debated this issue of our financial position and has started to consider what needs to be done.

On the one hand, the union is not intended to be a profit making business.

On the other hand, there is a view that the circumstances that will arise over the next few years do present an opportunity to secure the long term future of the union.

In particular, it may well be possible to purchase an office property to house the union for the future. At present the UFU rents office space from Unions Tasmania (formerly the Tasmanian Trades and Labour Council).

While this rental arrangement is competitive from a cost point of view, it does mean that we are a tenant and do not control our own future. Indeed, there is presently a strong likelihood that Unions Tasmania may again have to move (and us with it) because of disagreements with the present neighbours (the State Cinema owners) over parking.

If this comes to pass it will be the third time we have had to move in six years. Moving is always disruptive to the running of the union office.

The Branch Committee of Management will present members with a range of options to consider in respect to our financial future during the course of 2005.

ACTIVITIES AND ISSUES

Union Workplace Representatives and Employee Safety Representatives

Subsequent to the Branch elections that were held in the first half of 2003, a full round of Union Workplace Representative and Employee Safety Representative elections was held in the second half of 2003.

It is very satisfying to be able to report that the largest number of workplace union activists has been elected in the history of the UFU in Tasmania.

43 members hold positions as either Branch Committee of Management members, Union Workplace Representatives or Employees Safety Representatives.

This means that around 1 in 8 of our members has taken on an elected role in the affairs of the union in the workplace.

Annual Conference/Training Course

The Conference/Training Course that was held at Orford on 18 and 19 March 2004 was again a great success.

A number of new faces joined those who had attended previously with a view to putting the final touches to our plan for the 2004 EBA campaign.

A suggestion was made that we might restructure future conferences to a three day format so that the particular interests of OH&S reps can be dealt with as well as other specific union issues. For example, the conference could be structured as follows.

- Day 1 Employee Safety Representatives only
- Day 2 Employee Safety Representatives and Union Workplace
Representatives together
- Day 3 Union Workplace Representatives only

This would ensure that each participant attended for two days but would have one day set aside exclusively for their specific area of interest.

Since accommodation is the major expense, this three day approach would mean little additional cost.

As an aside, those who are careful readers of the “Australian Firefighter” magazine will have noticed over recent times that a number of mainland branches of the UFU have followed the lead of the Tasmanian Branch and are now organising conferences of this sort for their “shop stewards”.

Certified Agreement

The *Tasmania Fire Service Employee’s Enterprise Bargaining Agreement 2004* was the dominant focus of our activities over the course of the past year. This new agreement was an enormous undertaking from start to finish.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the UFU Negotiating Team for their sterling efforts in convincing the TFS and the Tasmanian Government to make us an offer worthy of the consideration of members.

Wayne Seabrook, Vincent Males, Ian McLachlan and Darren Gye each gave up inordinate amounts of their own time and each made a significant contribution to the outcome. In the end this new agreement will cost the TFS five million dollars every year from the end of 2006 onwards. That’s called making a difference.

While the negotiations for this new agreement were not as heated as some others have been in the past, it is true to say on the other hand that they were the most complicated and technical negotiations we have ever been involved in. This was in large measure due to the wide range of issues raised by members as reflected in our claim.

In the end most of the issues raised by members in our claim have been resolved or will be dealt with in due course. Only a minority of them were rejected outright by the employer.

Some observations about pay rises over the past year are worth considering here.

The financial year from 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2004 saw the following pay rises.

1 September 2003	-	3.0%
1 April 2004	-	1.5%
<u>*TOTAL</u>	-	<u>4.5%</u>

This picture of the increases over the financial year does not tell the full story, however.

The increases won by the UFU over the 2004 calendar year (1 January 2004 to 31 December 2004) are as follows.

1 April 2004	-	1.5%
1 July 2004	-	3.5%
1 December 2004	-	6.6%
<u>*TOTAL</u>	-	<u>12.6%</u>

(*These totals do not factor in the cumulative effect of the increases).

A 12.6% plus pay increase over the past twelve months is an extraordinary outcome in anybody's language.

If we take a longer term view, however, the picture is even more impressive.

By the time this current agreement has been put into full effect in 2006, Tasmanian members of the UFU will have won the following wage increases over the ten year period from 1997 to 2006.

1997	-	7%
1999	-	8%
2001	-	12.5%
2004 - 2006	-	24.9%
<u>TOTAL</u>		<u>52.4%</u>

This means the UFU will have more than doubled the dollar value incomes of most of its members during the ten year period from 1997 to 2006. Given that this will have happened during a period of historically low inflation, these increases constitute a real and significant improvement in the living standards of Firefighters in this state.

The lesson from all of this is simple. Union members earn more and win bigger pay rises.

Increases of this sort would never have happened if Firefighters and Officers in this state had not formed a union for themselves and fought for a better deal.

Attached to this Annual Report is an article that has been submitted for inclusion in the pending issue of the national UFU magazine the "Australian Firefighter".

This article is entitled,

"Twenty four point nine percent over three years - how did it happen?"

The purpose of the article is to provide members of the UFU of A in mainland states and territories with an understanding of the political and industrial background to our recent EBA success.

While the article was written with the mainland reader in mind, I strongly encourage Tasmanian Branch members to spend some time reflecting on how this extraordinary outcome came about.

Public Safety Training Package (PSTP)

The Public Safety Training Package has continued to be an area of difficulty over the past year.

Concerns over the pay point schedule have led to a UFU ban on gap training that remains unresolved. An initiative has been put in place next week to again try and resolve this issue.

On a broader level, the current circumstances surrounding the introduction of the PSTP are an indictment on fire industry employers in Australia. The PSTP is supposed to be a uniform national training system for the Australian Firefighting industry. Instead it is a shambles.

The problems that occurred with introduction of the competency based training system in the mid 1990's should have been all the education that the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) needed to ensure that the same mistakes weren't made.

Instead, the principle problem remains. The money, resources and personnel required for the development of training materials is totally inadequate. There is a national void in relation to leadership on this issue.

Tasmania therefore now finds itself in a position where we have to go it alone in the development of Training Resource Kits for the new units of competency, at our own expense and time.

No doubt many of the other states and territories are duplicating the same work and are wasting large amounts of taxpayers' money in the process.

In my view the people who are responsible for this set of circumstances at a national level should all be sacked. The Firefighting industry in Australia employs in excess of 15,000 people and utilises at least 250,000 volunteers. The budget for the industry on a national level is in the billions, yet the people in charge can't even get it together to develop and publish a national set of training manuals.

Indeed, this set of circumstances draws into question the reasons for the existence of AFAC itself.

If AFAC is incapable of even overseeing the production of a national set of training manuals for firefighters, how can it be relied on to provide national leadership in relation to emergency operations?

Perhaps it is time for state and federal governments to seriously consider if AFAC deserves to continue to exist as the peak body for the firefighting industry in Australia.

Superannuation

The UFU has done significant work this year in dealing with the question of the future of the State Fire Commission Superannuation Fund (SFCSF).

This has required extensive consultation by the UFU office with.

- The Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority (APRA)
- The State Government Treasury
- The employee nominated trustees of RBF
- The State Fire Commission Trustees
- TFS management
- UFU members generally

I am of the view that the proposed course of action in modifying existing category A benefits and transferring administration of the fund as a whole to RBF is, on balance, the best course of action.

While it may be theoretically true that the fund might be able to trade its way out of difficulty over the next five year period or so, the fact is that APRA will not allow it to do so.

That is, the Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority has clearly stated that it will close the State Fire Commission Superannuation Fund down unless immediate steps are taken to guarantee its solvency. Trading out of difficulty over the medium term is not an option they will entertain.

If the fund were to be closed down, each member would be issued with a cheque based on their current relative entitlements and be required by law to roll that cheque over into another complying superannuation fund.

Worst of all, the policy of the Tasmanian Government is that currently employed Firefighters and Officers would, from the closure of the SFCSF, be treated the same as any new employee of the Tasmanian Government and only be entitled to the minimum 9% superannuation employer payments required by federal law.

This would be the worst possible of all outcomes.

Indeed, we will have enough of a fight on our hands when the Tasmanian Government tries to restrict the next group of Firefighter recruits to the minimum 9% superannuation payment required by federal law. There is little doubt that the Tasmanian Government will try to introduce this cut back in benefits for the next lot of recruits. It will be up to us to make sure they don't get away with it.

The last thing we need is to have our entire membership in the position of only getting the minimum 9% employer superannuation payments because the existing fund has been shut down.

OH&S

A number of important steps have been taken to improve the OH&S performance of the TFS over the past year.

The organisation has been convinced to meet its obligations in relation to hearing tests/conservation and manual handling.

A set of guidelines regarding the maximum number of hours in a day and consecutive days spent working on campaign fires has been developed and put into place.

The TFS has been convinced to put resources into a pre-incident planning project that has the potential to provide both operational and OH&S benefits.

The TFS has also been convinced to start consultation on a new generation of turnout gear that may or may not include a moisture barrier.

Perhaps most importantly, an OH&S consultative committee structure has been agreed upon and meetings have commenced. It is pleasing to be able to report that the Specialist Rescue OH&S Committee has finally been established so that our Employee Safety Representatives can meet on a state wide regular basis.

Workers Compensation

It is also pleasing to be able to report that some of the more serious and long term workers compensation claims of members were resolved during the year.

Indeed, it is a pleasure to be able to say that at the time of writing (and for the first time in the past eight years) that we do not have a UFU member currently caught up in a nightmare workers compensation case (this would of course be very different if the TFS Stores Clerk had been a UFU member).

This aspect of the work of the UFU does not draw a lot of attention because of the privacy rights of members. Perhaps the most telling thing that can be said is that very often a member going through a serious workers compensation case quickly reaches the conclusion that the only two people they can trust are their lawyer and their union representative. Since lawyers charge by the minute, it often falls to the union representative to be the one to provide advice, assistance and support.

Until the day comes when we have a fair and just workers compensation system in Tasmania we will have to put up with our members being traumatised as much by the legal processes they have to undergo as by their original injury.

In comparison to innocent road crash victims under the MAIB (Motor Accident Insurance Board) Workers Compensation victims are treated like criminals by insurance companies.

So, unless you want to be treated like a criminal, don't get injured at work.

Non Rostered Shift Work Officers

Resolution has finally been achieved in relation to the long running question of the employment status of Leading Firefighters who are promoted into non rostered shift work positions.

Officers in Training Services and Field Works positions who have been promoted from operations will continue to be part of the operational stream.

Leading Firefighters who are promoted into Community Fire Safety positions will be selected against the full range of operational selection criteria and will be qualified as operational Officers. In addition, they will be selected against relevant Community Fire Safety selection criteria. This will mean in future that their status as qualified operational Officers will not be in doubt. The only issue to be addressed upon their return to operations will be the currency of their competence.

In short, all promotions from the operational steam in future will lead to full operational Officer recognition. This is a common sense approach that will eliminate confusion and disadvantage in the future.

Road Accident Rescue

Some concern and debate has occurred of late due to correspondence that has been forwarded from and to the Health and Community Services Union over this issue.

A number of members have expressed the view that recent correspondence emanating from the UFU office on this issue could have been more diplomatic. This is probably a fair point. In response I would say that the UFU office has been diplomatic on this issue for the past eight years and nothing has come of it. Indeed, the tone of the recent item of correspondence in question is probably due to frustration at the long standing belligerence of some parties to this discussion.

While some may be ambivalent about taking on responsibility for road accident rescue at some time in the future, this is not the majority position of UFU members.

Indeed, the UFU office has been under considerable pressure over a long period of time to do something about this issue. In addition, there has been significant pressure to straighten out the issue of not being called to road accidents generally. The correspondence under discussion clearly shows that the diplomatic approach has proved fruitless in this case.

In the end, Firefighters have to ask themselves who is more important. Are the concerns of Ambulance Officers, Firefighters or Police Officers about their status more important than the concerns of people trapped in motor vehicle accidents?

After all, the next person who gets trapped in a road smash in Tasmania might be someone you know.

National UFU issues

The National Executive of the UFU has embarked on a significant new direction in relation to managing the affairs of the National Union. In essence, the steps that will be taken are as follows.

- The National Office will be relocated from Melbourne to Canberra.
- A National Executive Officer will be appointed and will work under the direction of the National Committee of Management.
- A National Secretary and President will continue to be elected from among the members of the National Committee of Management.

Advertisements have already been placed in national newspapers for the National Executive Officer position and interviews will take place in the near future, with appointment anticipated in very early 2005.

The role of the National Executive Officer will be to advance the interests of the UFU of A on a national level, particularly in respect to trying to have a positive influence on the Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) and the Federal Government.

It is hoped that the employment of a neutral person from outside will generate a more collaborative approach among branches than has been the case on occasions in the past.

Members should note that the National Executive Officer will not be an office holder under the union rules but rather will be a full time employee.

Most importantly, these initiatives will not lead to any additional cost imposed on the branches in so far as national affiliation fees are concerned.

CONCLUSION

I wish to thank Wayne Seabrook and the members of the Branch Committee of Management for their direction, support and effort this year. Leon Dewhurst and Jeremy Smith also deserve special mention as State Fire Commission representative and Returning Officer respectively.

I would also like to thank those members who took on responsibility as either a Union Workplace Representative or Employee Safety Representative over the last period. Your role is central to our success

Most importantly, however, I wish to thank Kaye Jones for her outstanding work and professionalism as Office Manager.

Richard Warwick
Secretary