

**UNITED FIREFIGHTERS UNION OF AUSTRALIA
TASMANIA BRANCH**

**ANNUAL REPORT
2006**

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1. Introduction

2006 has been an historic year for the Branch. The final payment arising from the current certified agreement coupled with the transfer of road accident rescue to the TFS represent two important achievements that many detractors thought would never be achieved.

2006 has also been a busy year in a host of other areas as well.

2. Finances

The financial year saw steady management of the Branch Fund with a tenth consecutive surplus being recorded.

Future financial reports will show an increase in rent. The union office consists of two rooms and it became apparent after an audit by our landlord (Unions Tasmania) that we have only ever paid for one of them. This will mean our rent bill will in future be doubled, but at the same time this money will go towards covering the cost of the whole Unions Tasmania building being connected to the TFS via a direct brigade alarm. While the building has always been alarmed for fire the system was

not connected as a DBA. Consequently, an out of hour's false alarm during the year made all parties realise just how exposed the building was to the potential of a real fire.

While the increase in rent is regrettable, at least the money is being put to good use.

2006 was also the first year of engagement with new auditors WHK Dennison Pty Ltd and they have proven to be both effective and a pleasure to work with.

3. Branch elections

2006 was a hectic year for elections. The Australian Electoral Office conducted two rounds of elections for Branch Committee of Management positions. The Branch Returning Officer conducted two rounds of elections for Union Workplace Representatives and one each for Employee Safety Representatives and State Consultative Committee members.

These elections are both long and exacting. The Branch clearly needs to consider amendments to our rules that will ensure that only one round of elections for Branch Committee of Management positions is required in future.

This can be achieved by amending Schedule 6 of our federally registered rules entitled "BRANCH RULES OF THE UNITED FIREFIGHTERS' UNION OF AUSTRALIA TASMANIA BRANCH."

This section of the rules only relates to the Tasmania Branch of the UFU of A and is a means by which we can make rules to govern our own affairs, so long as any additional rules we make do not conflict with the federal rules as a whole.

4. Branch Committee of Management (BCOM)

The Branch Committee of Management met on five occasions during 2006 and a schedule of attendances is attached to this report as required by decision of the Committee.

The BCOM successfully dealt with a host of issues during the course of the year.

It is unfortunate that the complexity of the election process meant that the BCOM did not have full representation during much of the year. As stated above, The BCOM election process needs to be amended to ensure that positions are not left vacant for months on end.

5. Certified agreement implementation

(i) Station Officers 123% relativity

Agreement was reached on the Station Officers 123% relativity during the course of the year.

(ii) FIRECOMM

A number of additional items were dealt with by the FIRECOMM Working Party in 2006. The most recent of these was a dispute over a trial of Education Department alarms over the Internet as opposed to landline connections. This trial caused no end of problems for operators, even to the point where unremitting faults actually hindered FIRECOMM service delivery. This trial is clearly motivated by departmental cost cutting philosophies. It is unfortunate that FIRECOMM members were not properly listened to at an early stage.

It is also pleasing to be able to report that FIRECOMM now has a permanent union elected seat on the State Consultative Committee

(iii) Pay rises

2006 saw only one pay rise for the year on 1 December 2006 (3.5% for TFE members and the Community Fire Safety Five while all others received 6.4%). This finalises the increases under the 2004 Certified Agreement.

(iv) Bullying, harassment and discrimination

The State Consultative Committee has commenced work on the 2004 Certified Agreement objective of reducing these unacceptable forms of behaviour in the workplace. The initial focus will be on bullying with a joint TFS / UFU poster campaign warning bullies that their behaviour is unacceptable.

6. Road Accident Rescue (RAR)

1 December 2006 will be remembered as a very important day in the history of the Tasmanian Branch of the UFU of A.

In any other year the importance of this date would simply be that members received a 6.4% pay rise thus concluding the increases under the three year 24.9% agreement reached back in 2004.

This year something more important happened.

At 0001 hours on 1/12/2006 the Tasmania Fire Service became responsible for using hydraulic cutting and spreading tools to extricate persons trapped in motor vehicles in the urban response areas of Tasmania (commonly known as RAR). The Tasmanian Ambulance Service formerly performed this function.

Prior to this date Tasmania was virtually the only place in the industrialised world where firefighters weren't responsible for this job.

The Tasmanian Ambulance Service became responsible for the work in question back in the 1970's when patient extrication technology first became available. That misguided judgment by a long forgotten Government survived for forty years.

However, the current Tasmanian Government and the current Minister for Health and Human Services had the courage and determination to take a tough decision that will lead to the following benefits for the Tasmanian community.

- Better response times to RAR incidents.
- Many more emergency service workers at incidents of this sort.
- More rescue units available (particularly for multiple incidents occurring at the same time), and
- An easing of the workload of Tasmanian Ambulance Officers.

All of this will come at no additional cost to Tasmanian Taxpayers.

Unfortunately, this decision pitted us for much of the year against our fellow unionists employed in the Tasmanian Ambulance Service. This conflict cannot be described as a demarcation dispute since in the end no industrial action was taken. The public debate over this issue was, however, at times very bitter. The Tasmanian Branch sought at all times to act with dignity and respect for the negotiating position of the ambulance employees union. At the same time we could not avoid making positive public comment on our preparedness to do this work and our view that the Government had made the right decision.

The lead up to the hand over of responsibilities on 1 December 2006 saw an unprecedented training effort in the TFS. Ninety percent of rostered shift work firefighters in Tasmania were trained and assessed to the national RAR standard over a three-month period.

Our long-standing claim for firefighters to be paid a national wage was achieved on the same day as the RAR hand-over and it can truly be now said we do the national job. This was genuine history in the making.

7. 2006 State Government election

Given the WORKCHOICES environment created by the Howard Government the March 17th State Government election took on far greater significance for members than would otherwise be the case.

Since the State Government employs firefighters directly, the outcome was the best one possible in respect to safeguarding member's jobs, wages and conditions, at least for a four-year period.

The Branch surveyed the political parties during the election period and secured the agreement of the Australian Labor Party to continue to pay firefighters comparable wages to the mainland and to not implement WORCHOICES.

The Branch contributed \$15,000 to a Unions Tasmania fund to run the ACTU "Your Rights at Work" television advertisements during the election campaign. Many Liberal Party candidates acknowledged that these advertisements significantly contributed to their poor showing in the election outcome.

8. Expanding response areas

Much work is being done on trying to rectify the situation where career firefighting crews are sitting in fire stations when they could be doing meaningful work in retained brigade areas. The UFU is in dialogue with the Retained and Volunteer Associations on this issue and we have forcefully put to them the view that this situation must change. These discussions have been chaired by the TFS.

9. Personal protective clothing

Members will be aware that a trial of new turnout gear is occurring.

The national position of the UFU of A is that all firefighting personal protective clothing (turnout gear) should contain a moisture barrier.

In addition, the differently coloured outer fabric material on some of the evaluation sets of gear (called PBI Gold) is regarded by many as a far superior fabric for protecting firefighters.

Two simulation trial days will be held in 2007 (one in summer and one in winter) prior to the commencement of negotiations for a new generation of turnout gear.

10. OH&S

Steady progress has been made during the year in ensuring TFS compliance with the Health and Safety Act 1995. Hearing conservation has been a priority along with risk assessments and pre incident planning.

An emerging issue is the question of toxic residue emanating from structure fires after extinguishment. Research in the MFB (Melbourne) is showing that extremely dangerous airborne particles can remain present long after firefighters have done their initial work of extinguishment.

The Central Health and Safety Committee will be recommending to all firefighters that they continue to wear their BA at all times when inside or in close proximity to structures that have been burnt, even if the fire has long since been put out.

11. Training

Members will be aware that the Branch lodged a formal complaint to the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority against the TFS for its failure to properly implement the Public Safety Training Package and in respect to its commitment to training generally.

While there were some disappointing aspects in the response of the Tasmanian Qualifications Authority, it can reasonably said that a number of points of failure were identified and the TFS has been instructed to remedy them.

The survey of employees that is currently being conducted by the TFS is one of those points and members now have the opportunity to tell the TFS what they really think about the standard of training in the service.

Given the high level of criticism by members over the years in respect to the TFS training effort, it is important that this survey be responded to in an honest manner.

12. National Union

2006 was also a milestone year for the UFU from a national perspective. On 22 November 2006 the International Firefighters' Unions Alliance was formed in Wellington New Zealand. The alliance consists of the United Firefighters' Union of Australia, The Fire Brigade Employees' Union (United Kingdom) the International Association of Firefighters (USA and Canada) and the New Zealand Professional Firefighters' Union. Other countries will be welcome to join into the future.

More generally, 2006 was a year of cooperation and progress for the UFU of A. The Australian Firefighter Magazine has been revamped and modernised. In so doing the magazine now contributes a significant revenue stream to the National Office. In addition, all branches of the UFU of A have web-sites that are managed by Queensland company ATWONE.

These have both been very important steps forward in modernising our methods of communicating with members.

13. YR@W

Members made the decision in 2006 to vacate the federal industrial system and to transfer to state industrial relations system. As public servants firefighters are in the fortunate position of being able to avoid the WORKCHOICES system for the time being. The State Industrial Commission is still able to exercise exclusive jurisdiction over Tasmanian Government employees, despite the recent High Court of Australia decision to validate the WORKCHOICES legislation for virtually all private industry.

It should be remembered, however, that it will always be open to a future Tasmanian Government to vacate the field of industrial relations and hand the regulation of the employment of Tasmanian government employees to Canberra. This is exactly what Jeff Kennett did in Victoria in 1996. If that happens, Tasmanian career firefighters will immediately be thrown into the WORKCHOICES system.

In a nutshell what that means is that we only have a guarantee that the Tasmanian Industrial Commission will provide us with protection so long as both it and a Tasmanian Labor Government survive.

Applications will be lodged with both federal and state industrial relations commissions shortly to give effect to this decision.

14. Gaol for arsonists

The Branch made strong representations to both the Attorney General and the Minister for Police and Public Safety during the year seeking to have the Tasmanian criminal code amended.

The law as it stands at the moment means that an arsonist could not be charged with the serious wounding or death of a firefighter unless it could be proven that the arsonist deliberately set out to harm that firefighter (for example by deliberately setting a booby trap for a firefighter).

Our proposal is that arsonists should be charged with causing grievous bodily harm or manslaughter, as the case may be, should their actions harm or kill firefighters. The Ministers concerned have met our representations with enthusiasm and it is hoped that our proposed amendments to the Tasmanian criminal code will form part of the 2007 legislative program of the Parliament.

15. UFUTAS web-site

Much work has been done on developing and running the new UFUTAS web-site. This has meant learning new skills at the union office and a significant addition to the workload. At the same time we have tried to bring an element of humour to the site and to change stories often to keep the interest of visitors.

Web site statistics can be notoriously unreliable. Fortunately our service provider is able to give us meaningful figures and they indicate that the site receives about twenty genuine visitors per day.

16. Other

(i) The Community Fire Safety five

It is unfortunate to have to report that this issue remains unresolved. The five members in question were employed in Community Fire Safety from outside the career firefighting stream and continue to be disadvantaged because they are not employed under the Firefighters Award.

This issue has become complicated by the fact that TasFire Training is not performing well financially.

(ii) Whole of Government radio network

The Branch was keen to press its case (in concert with the Retained and Volunteer Associations) concerning reservations about the proposed Whole of Government Radio Network. The State Government appears to be determined to press ahead with this project. However, we can at least say that they are fully aware that there will be howls of derision and protest from all quarters if they don't get it right.

(iii) Disciplinary matters

The Branch successfully dealt with the most important disciplinary matter of recent times during the year. The UFU will fight to long and hard for members wrongly accused.

17. 2007 bargaining round

Because the current Certified Agreement expires on 30 June 2007 our attention must soon turn to a new round of bargaining. The commitment of the Tasmanian Government to continue to match an average of the 100% First Class Firefighters' rate of pay as paid in other states and territories means we will have to take a mature approach to our wage claim.

One further important matter for consideration is that new employees are only being paid 9% superannuation (as of 1 July 2005).

Another is that there is a need to put in place a proper system of dress uniform, work wear and turnout gear that is appropriate in all cases and integrated to the greatest extent possible.

18. 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. I would also like to thank those Union Workplace Representatives and Employee Safety Representatives who did not seek re-election in 2006. Your efforts over the years are greatly appreciated.

Most importantly, however, I wish to thank Kae Jones for her outstanding work and professionalism as Office Manager, even if she was more interested in seeing Robbie Williams in Sydney on 8 December 2006 rather than attending the Branch Committee of Management Christmas dinner.

Richard Warwick
Secretary
December 2006