

**UNITED FIREFIGHTERS UNION OF AUSTRALIA TASMANIAN
BRANCH**

ANNUAL REPORT 2003

GENERAL

The branch recorded a year of consolidation on all fronts. Although 2003 was not an EBA year there were great many issues to deal with and progress has been made in a number of areas.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership has remained stable over the year and currently stands at 321 members.

FINANCIAL

The Branch recorded a \$9000+ surplus for the year and the consolidated union fund continues to be in a strong position. This is important given that 2004 will be an EBA year.

ELECTIONS

2003 was an election year for the union and all Committee of Management, Union Workplace Representative, Employees Safety Representative and State Consultative Committee positions were advertised.

All Committee of Management positions and State Consultative Committee positions were filled.

A very small number of vacancies were not filled for Union Workplace Representatives and Employee Safety Representatives. Most importantly, however, all shifts in Hobart and Launceston will have at least one of each of these representatives. In addition, most areas outside of shiftwork operations also have workplace union and health and safety representation.

Elections for National Secretary and National President were subsequently dealt with at the annual National Committee of Management meeting that was held in Melbourne in November 2003. Peter Marshall (Victorian Secretary) was returned as National Secretary and Ron Hannah (Immediate Past President South Australia) was returned as National President.

ISSUES

Current EBA

Only a few issues have arisen because of the implementation of the current Certified Agreement. The most notable of these has been the implementation of the 2% for 1st Class Firefighters and Senior Firefighters who take on additional training responsibilities

A consolidated version of the 1999 and Millennium Certified Agreements was prepared by the UFU and provided to the TFS but nothing has been heard back as yet.

Non rostered shift workers working party

A number of meetings of this working party were held in the first half of the year. As yet a final report has not been produced. Hours and days spent at campaign fires and District Officers overtime were discussed at great length however.

2002 -2003 bushfire season

A number of issues arose out of the 2002/2003 bushfire season.

District Officers overtime

Some additional payments were made to some District Officers by the Chief Officer in recognition of their effort during last fire season. Much correspondence ensued with the Chief about the status of these payments. The latest position of the Chief Officer is that he does not intend to pay overtime payments to District Officers.

Rosetta fires

Significant problems were identified insofar as the TFS being able to recall enough firefighting personnel when incidents of this magnitude occur. Proposals included providing "overtime pagers" to those who want them and providing childcare facilities.

It will be interesting to see if improvements occur in the numbers responding to overtime when large fires occur.

Hours

Much debate and argument has been had about the number of hours that should be worked and the number of consecutive days that should be worked on campaign fires (non-remote).

The TFS has been persuaded by the UFU to publish a set of guidelines on this issue for the 2003/2004 bushfire season as a trial.

Sector Commander training

Inadequate numbers of career staff who are qualified as Sector Commanders was identified as a major shortcoming during the 2003/2004 bushfire season.

The UFU pushed all year for this training to be provided. It is unfortunate that threats of going to the media had to be made to get the right outcome.

Public Safety Training Package

Translation and pay point schedule

General meetings are currently ratifying these new documents. A great deal of work has been done by a lot of people to ensure that these documents are appropriate. The UFU has been at great pains to ensure that members are not disadvantaged by the translation to the new system.

Outstanding modules

The old CBT system led to a situation where a number of members were deemed not competent to seek promotion unless they completed certain modules. In the case of some Leading Firefighters, they were deemed to be competent to act up but not to be able to seek promotion because of this. The UFU argued strongly that the TFS should just get in and train these people and resolve this issue so that everyone would translate to the new PSTP on an even footing.

National ban on PSTP

The national union does not have the capacity, under the union rules, to impose national bans or strikes.

Against my better judgement, a national ban on implementation of the PSTP was agreed by the National Executive for most of 2002. The National Executive of the UFU held in February 2003 resolved to lift this ban when the first meeting of the National PSTP implementation Committee occurred. The agreement of fire industry employers to the establishment of this committee was one of the major demands that led to the ban being implemented in the first place.

The first meeting of this national committee came and went and the mainlanders who attended for the UFU either forgot or defied the instructions of the National Executive to lift the ban.

In any event, the delegates to the National Committee of Management meeting in November were told that as far as the Tasmanian Branch is concerned the people who have argued for the ban have done nothing to resolve their problems over the past two years and have lost all moral authority and credibility on the issue. The meeting was advised that should it be the

wish of the members of the UFU in Tasmania, the PSTP will be implemented in our state in 2004.

Western Australia supported this position.

Shift changes HFB

Much work has been done in dealing with the problems that arose when around 12 members were moved from B shift Hobart to other shifts in November 2002.

It is pleasing to be able to report that a likely outcome will be that a protocol will be released that will set out the steps that will occur in relation to compulsory shift changes, including timeframes and proper consultation in the future.

Superannuation

Preservation age

The union is continuing to consider ways in which an exemption from these provisions might be achieved for emergency workers generally and firefighters in particular. The UFU is developing an alliance with the Police Federation of Australia for that purpose. It is fair to say that the best prospect for an exemption continues to be a change of Government in Canberra.

Salary sacrifice of existing contributions

The UFU in Tasmania is continuing to press for the existing compulsory superannuation contributions to be treated as a salary sacrifice amount.

The most recent development on this issue was a letter from the Minister for Health and Human Services which said, reading between the lines, that the Tasmanian Government thinks the idea has merit; that they are doing what they can and are negotiating with the Federal Government about it and that the UFU should stop hounding them on the issue. This matter will be pursued in the New Year.

SO's working in CFS

Much time and effort has been spent on attempting to resolve the twin issues of how existing Leading Firefighters who have worked as Officers in CFS should be treated upon return to operations, and what should happen with future employees.

It is unfortunate that the TFS has created a situation where existing employees have been disadvantaged by past practices. It is even more unfortunate that the TFS appears not to be able to see the wisdom of maintaining career paths in CFS for career firefighters.

Annual Conference/Training Course

A highly successful Annual Conference/Training Course was held over two days in March 2003 involving Union Workplace Representatives, Employee Safety Representatives and Branch Committee of Management members. The focus of the conference was on skills for union and safety representatives in the workplace.

It is proposed to hold a conference in March 2004 with a focus on EBA.

Promotion and advancement provisions for TFE officers

Promotion and advancement provisions for Tasfire Equipment Officers were established during the year.

Trucks

The TFS has been convinced to purchase two new first turnout appliances in 2004.

OH&S issues

OH&S issues dealt with during the year include:

- the negotiation by and agreement of the UFU to a new OH&S Committee structure for the TFS
- the LFB engine bay door investigation
- noise and hearing tests and conservation program
- a trail of lightweight carbon fibre BA cylinders
- Hepatitis B immunisations

Other issues that have been dealt with include:

- the Performance Appraisal Working Party, which appears to have stalled.
- the promulgation issue that was to be dealt with at an SCC meeting on 12 December 2003 but which was unfortunately cancelled by the TFS.

- The issue of fitness assessments which the TFS appears to be paralysed in relation to.
- The failure of the Chief Officer to consult on the establishment of the Operational Resources and Services Committee and our subsequent decision to not participate in this committee.

Letter to Minister

It was unfortunate that during the course of the year it was necessary to write to the Minister to complain about the slowness of the TFS in responding to issues raised by the UFU in correspondence.

It does appear however, that the TFS was instructed to lift its game insofar as responding to issues and correspondence is concerned.

Preparation for 2004 EBA

Shift/crew meetings were held around the state in October and November 2003. The major topic of discussion was the 2004 EBA.

It is fair to say that shiftwork members are well informed about the process that we will be going into. It is also fair to say that there is a genuine commitment by members to achieving the best possible outcome from this bargaining round.

Similar meetings of Non Rostered Shift Workers will occur in February 2004

Workers Compensation

It is unfortunate that we continue to have Workers Compensation cases occurring that have to be dealt with. These can be highly stressful on the members concerned.

All UFU members should do all they can to ensure that both they and their work colleagues don't get hurt on the job.

NATIONAL UFU ISSUES

The National Executive of the UFU met in February, June and August of 2003. The June meeting was held in Adelaide to coincide with the departure of Mick Doyle who resigned his position as South Australian Secretary and has become a Commissioner in the South Australian Industrial Commission.

The National Committee of Management met in Melbourne in November 2003.

The major focus of these meetings was on the future of the National Union. It is true to say that it has been difficult to agree on a role for the National Union in the period since the introduction of the enterprise bargaining system.

The November meeting decided that the National Office of the Union should be located in Canberra. The logic of this decision is based on the fact that bushfire firefighting is increasingly becoming a matter of interest to the Australian Parliament, particularly the Senate.

While the branches of the UFU deal with state based fire services and governments on a daily basis, we do not as a union have well established lines of communication with federal parliamentarians or with the Federal Government

In addition, a significant amount of money is being put into a body that has been established to conduct research into the fire industry generally and bushfires in particular. This body that has been established is called the Bushfire Co-operative Research Center and is based in Canberra. AFAC was instrumental in establishing this body and will play a leading role in its activities over the years to come.

Moreover, a number of issues such as superannuation preservation age and salary sacrifice for taxation purposes have increasingly become more important to UFU members around the country. These matters are the province of the Federal Treasury in Canberra.

It is worth noting that the Police Federation of Australia (the national union body for police around Australia) has recently set up its national office in Canberra for similar reasons.

Two Occupational Health and Safety Committee meetings were held during the year. This Committee has been fairly moribund over recent years and efforts have been made to make it more relevant, particularly in relation to day to day OH&S issues.

CONCLUSION

I wish to thank Wayne Seabrook and all members of the Branch Committee of Management, Leon Dewhurst, Jeremy Smith and all members who represented the union and took an interest during the year.

Most importantly, however, I wish to thank Kaye Jones for her outstanding work and professionalism in managing the Union office.

Richard Warwick
Secretary
VISIT TO NEW ZEALAND

I was fortunate to be invited to the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) that was held in Auckland on 9, 10 and 11 December 2003. The national body of the UFU pays for an Australian delegate to attend this conference each year and the Branch Secretaries rotate through on an 8 year cycle.

The firefighters union in New Zealand experienced perhaps greater challenges than any of the Australian Branches of our union during the course of the 1990's. In particular, the New Zealand Government employed a scab workforce in the mid 1990's and sacked every career firefighter in New Zealand. This tactic was later copied by Patrick Stevedores in Australia when in 1998 they sacked most of their employees who were members of the Maritime Union of Australia.

The outcome of the New Zealand dispute was that the union went on to defeat the New Zealand Government in a series of court challenges that lasted for several years. These court cases were extremely costly for the union, however, and the NZPFU is only now recovering financially.

It was made very clear to me that the financial and moral support that was provided by the UFU of A to the NZPFU during the darkest days of their 1995/97 dispute was greatly appreciated then and will never be forgotten.

Fortunately, the current Labor Government led by Helen Clarke appears to be far less hostile to the NZPFU and unions generally in comparison to previous New Zealand governments.

The level of commitment and solidarity that was apparent and demonstrated by the delegates to the NZPFU annual conference, born it is reasonable to say out of great adversity, is to be greatly admired.

They do still wear gum boots, however.

The major issues that are being dealt with by the NZPFU are fitness tests, workers compensation and clandestine drug laboratories

Previous contract negotiations have led to a scheme where fitness tests are a regular feature of life in the New Zealand Fire Service. While this may be unpopular with some, it is important to bear in mind that members of the NZPFU are being paid well to do so, in some cases up to \$1200 per year. One can only wonder at what the reaction of TFS or other Australian fire industry employers would be to such a scheme.

The workers compensation system in New Zealand appears to have suffered from a similar level of cutbacks in benefits and entitlements as has occurred in most Australian states in recent years. In addition, the New Zealand Fire Service has taken up the option of self-insuring for workers compensation over recent years. What this means is that they don't insure at all and instead use the money they would have spent on insurance premiums to finance the system. The logic of this is that it has the potential to lead to savings.

This appears to have led to tensions because the people employed by the New Zealand Fire Service to administer the self-insurance scheme are often in conflict with the members of the NZFS and the union.

It is true to say however that the OH&S legislation in New Zealand appears to be extremely rigorous. Indeed, it appears that the NZPFU does not need to take the same leading role in relation to OH&S in the way that the UFU does in Australia.

The current situation with clandestine drug laboratories in New Zealand is shocking. The Detective responsible for managing the New Zealand Police Force response to this problem addressed the conference.

The New Zealand Police Force responded to 147 incidents of this sort in during 2002. This is worse than 1 every three days. This figure has exploded from 2 incidents of this sort in 1998. The figure will be higher for 2003.

As is to be expected, the New Zealand Fire Service responded to most of these incidents.

The New Zealand police force estimates that more than 50% of motel rooms in the greater Auckland are contaminated with the residue from methamphetamine production.

At the same time the NZ media was carrying a constant stream of reports of murders and other criminal cases attributable to this drug commonly referred to as "p".

In addition, landlords of residential properties are facing legal action by tenants where rented accommodation has not been decontaminated after drug production. This is because the residue from methamphetamine production is carcinogenic.

The representative from the New Zealand Police Force indicated that the most recent policy adopted by them is that they will forgo prosecutions of offenders if there is any risk that the chemicals or contaminants involved at an incident are a significant risk to police, firefighters or the public.

It is possible that an important factor in the huge increase in numbers of these sorts of incidents is the strong gang culture that is evident in New Zealand.

The representative from the New Zealand Police Force further indicated that their intelligence is that the offenders are likely to start to look for quieter places to go to set up production. This is perhaps food for thought for those branches of the UFU of A where clan labs have not yet been a big issue.