

NZ firefighters fight mass sackings

A New Zealand correspondent
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The union covering New Zealand's firefighters has entered into an official mediation process with the Fire Service Commission over a plan to sack the 1,600 firemen and re-hire a reduced number.

The government's plan is similar to the recent attacks on the Australian waterfront workers. All the firefighters are to be sacked and forced to reapply for their jobs. Over 400 fewer positions will be available. Manning on fire engines is to be reduced from four to three, significantly increasing the risk of injury and death.

Since the restructuring plans were announced last month, the Professional Firefighters Union and the NZ Council of Trade Unions, to which it is affiliated, have isolated the firefighters, calling limited protest actions, while placing the dispute in the hands of the courts.

The union initially sought a judicial review of the Fire Service's plans in the High Court, while simultaneously taking a case to the employment court over the manner of the forecast mass sackings. No industrial action has been called.

This has been in marked contrast to the opposition and hostility to the restructuring plans from firefighters and their supporters in the working class. Two firefighters were summarily sacked last week following their involvement in a demonstration at a meeting being addressed by the Fire Service Commission chairman Roger Estall.

The two firemen, Mike Meaden and Barry Richie, were singled out for victimisation following a verbal confrontation in a Dunedin street, during which Estall claimed he had been subjected to 'intimidation' by a group of 40 protesting firefighters. Both firefighters involved have over 20 years' service, with Richie only recently receiving a commendation for bravery following his involvement in a life-saving rescue.

Estall lodged a complaint the day following the demonstration, using his position to force the

commission's chief executive to order an immediate inquiry. Within a day the two firemen had been found guilty of 'bringing the fire service into disrepute' and sacked. This was accompanied by a media campaign which attempted to depict the firemen as a violent and unruly mob.

Despite this, the sacking immediately heightened widespread support for the firefighters. When the story featured on a television current affairs program 'Holmes', over 20,000 phone calls were taken on the issue, the highest ever recorded, with 82 percent running in favour of the men. The Fire Service responded to growing support for the firefighters by banning the use of fire stations for public protest meetings. Fire officers who organised or appeared at such meetings were threatened with disciplinary action.

In agreeing to enter mediation, the union and the commission have given undertakings that will now take the dispute behind closed doors. The union will not proceed with its court cases, while the commission will hold off on any layoffs while the mediation is in process.

Union secretary Derek Best welcomed the move. 'As far as we are concerned, mediation is a significant advancement. It is not an option we had before. We hope it will prove useful for resolving outstanding issues', he said. The Fire Service chief executive Jean Martin agreed, saying that 'mediation will enable a far more constructive debate on the future of the Fire Service'. This unified position is a warning that the mediation is designed to enable the union leadership to deliver the job cuts required by the government.

Opposition to the sackings has provoked tensions within the ranks of the government, a coalition of the National Party and New Zealand First. From the start, the Prime Minister and National Party leader Jenny Shipley has fully supported the Fire Service's moves, claiming that they were essential to modernise the

service. Moreover, Estall was appointed as Fire Commission Chairman by a NZ First Minister, Internal Affairs Minister Jack Elder, who continues to defend Estall.

However, NZ First MPs, fearing that the party's populist image would be damaged, sought to soften the impact of the sackings. MPs held a meeting with the Fire Commission early in the dispute, to try to convince it to manage the sackings through voluntary redundancies accompanied by redundancy payments. While NZ First claimed a victory on these issues, the Commission denied that it had made any agreement to implement these proposals.

The main opposition parties Labour and the Alliance have concentrated on attempting to single out Commission Chairman Estall as the culprit and architect of the restructuring plans. They have mounted a campaign through a parliamentary select committee for his dismissal, on the grounds that his position with the fire service is compromised by his interests in the insurance broking firm Marsh and McLennan, which advises companies on how to minimise their fire service levies.

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