

Cutbacks to New Zealand fire services

A correspondent
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The long-planned restructuring of the New Zealand Fire Service began this week with the loss of 100 firefighters' jobs nationwide and the decommissioning of fire appliances in the major cities of Wellington and Dunedin. The result will be a significantly depleted service with increases in workload and levels of danger for the remaining 1,500 firefighters.

In Wellington, the reduction in fire appliance numbers is occurring at the same time as a serial arsonist is lighting major fires in the inner suburbs and central business district. The Wellington fire brigade has fought a dozen major fires in the last three months, often stretching its resources to the limit.

One fire nearly killed two firemen who were caught in a collapsing section of a blazing house. The men would almost certainly have perished had the manning levels now being imposed by the Fire Services Commission been in force at the time.

The Fire Service originally released its "modernisation" plans last May. It proposed sacking the country's entire workforce of 1,600 professional firefighters and forcing them to apply for 400 fewer jobs. The plans were based on reducing the number of firemen per appliance on each callout from four to three.

The firefighters won widespread support from other workers and sections of the middle class who have become increasingly bitter about the assault on jobs and public services by successive governments since 1984. One sign was the public response to the sacking of two firemen following a confrontation with the chief of the Fire Service at a demonstration in Dunedin. When the story was screened on the television current affairs program "Holmes," over 20,000 phone calls were taken, the highest ever recorded, with 82 percent running in favor of the two men.

The popular opposition to the announced sackings provoked one of the first public disputes in the ranks of

the government, at that time a coalition between the National Party and New Zealand First. Differences over the political consequences of the restructuring subsequently became one of the issues that led last August to the disintegration of the coalition.

Yet the Professional Firefighters' Union and the Council of Trade Unions limited any action to isolated protests. During June and July, with the dispute clearly escalating and the Fire Service threatening wider disciplinary action against protesting firemen, the union placed the matter in the hands of the courts. It applied for an injunction to put the plans on hold, on the grounds that there had been no consultation with the union.

When the Employment Court granted the injunction the union claimed it had won a sweeping victory. At the time, union secretary Derek Best hailed the judgment as a "restoration of the rights of firefighters", and proof that employers "must abide by the law".

It was no victory for the firefighters. The court decision merely condemned the processes followed by the Fire Services Commission not the job cuts themselves. As a result the restructuring has proceeded with the full collaboration of the union leadership.

The consequences are already evident. Last week, Ian Graham, a station commander in Lower Hutt and senior firefighter with over 30 years' experience, resigned rather than submit to disciplinary charges over media statements he made critical of the fire service. He said that the internal disciplinary hearing had been set up, not to address the problems he had raised in a report, but to try him for the crime of "telling the truth".

Graham criticised the establishment of so-called Community Service Teams. The Fire Service has traditionally relied on a layer of unpaid volunteers to maintain a national service, mainly in rural areas. But the new Community Service Teams have been hastily recruited and trained, many of them from the ranks of

the volunteers, to take over the work of the professional firefighters. They are employed on individual contracts at lower pay rates, and with working conditions, such as difficult shift hours, long opposed by the full professionals.

Graham released his report to the media after one of these teams bungled the management of a house fire, resulting in the unnecessary loss of the house. He said the cursory training they had received--barely six weeks--made the teams totally inadequate and unsafe.

A fireman from Wairarapa, just north of Wellington, told the *WSWS* that the current phase of the restructuring program was only the beginning of a cost-cutting drive that would lead to further job cuts, the rundown of the fire service, and possibly its privatisation. He said the reduction in manning levels was based on the concept that saving property, not the safety of firemen, was the prime consideration of the government and Fire Service management.

In his view, the fire service is heading towards an operating system similar to the crash and fire tendering at the nation's airports, many of which have been privatised. These are run on the basis of a one-man operation. Fire appliances only have a driver, with the water cannons being fully automated. In critical situations, the deaths of firemen are inevitable, as fire crews will be forced to operate with little or no backup in the event of accidents.

As an example of deterioration of the fire service, he cited a recent major fire in the country's biggest city, Auckland. It was left undermanned because a particular high-level ladder appliance required to fight the fire was discovered to be without a current warrant of fitness needed by all motor vehicles to be legally on the road. The fireman commented that the service was now running on the basis of "a total disregard for basic rules and commonsense".



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