

New Zealand firefighters' union gives go-ahead for job cuts and restructuring

A correspondent
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The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union struck a new deal last week with the chief executive of the country's fire service over its long-planned restructuring program, which will result in the slashing of firefighters' jobs and the introduction of measures to boost "productivity".

The Fire Services Commission chairman Roger Estall, however, has refused to sign the agreement because it fails to meet planned budget cuts by some \$10 million. The differences between Estall and the chief executive Jean Martin has thrown the service into some turmoil and has brought pressure to bear on the National Party government to intervene and force a settlement.

The deal agreed between Martin and the union has not been made public but is reported to include:

- A plan to initially cut the number of firefighters by 100, instead of the 300 proposed in the restructuring program announced early last year. The union would then participate in a nine-month "research project" to examine methods to further cut the 1,600-strong workforce.
- Firefighters to spend more time on alternative duties when not fighting fires--a measure long opposed by firefighters as a fundamental attack on their conditions.
- A common contract for professional firefighters and those in so-called community safety teams. This would entrench lesser conditions for the safety teams and undermine the conditions of professional firefighters.
- A small wage increase following what has effectively been an eight-year wage freeze.

The union is pressing for the agreement to be supported by the Fire Services Commission. Union secretary Derek Best admitted that the union had made significant compromises to reach an accord with Martin

and said he was "staggered" that the Fire Services' governing board would hold up a deal brokered by its chief executive. Best said that he considered the accord to be a final agreement and said that it only needed Estall's signature for it to be "settled".

The Fire Service has been under continual assault since the government initiated a review in 1993. The first round of job cuts in 1994 resulted in the slashing of 330 firefighters' jobs and 120 redundancies among operational and support staff.

In 1995, firefighters took industrial action against further cutbacks. But the union limited the campaign to calling for public support for a referendum. A petition organised by the union gained over 200,000 signatures and forced a citizens' initiated referendum on the matter. But such referenda are not binding. Despite overwhelming opposition to the restructuring of the Fire Service, the government simply ignored the results.

In 1996, 300 professional firefighters took early retirement and the Fire Service hired non-union firefighters for new community safety teams. These teams, recruited mainly from the pool of volunteer firefighters, were introduced specifically to break down the working conditions in the existing service.

The current phase of the restructuring was prepared during 1997 and announced early last year. The government planned to sack the entire workforce of 1,600 firefighters and forced them to reapply for 300 fewer jobs. Again, despite opposition among firefighters and the working class as a whole, the union isolated its members and mounted only limited protest action.

While refusing to call any industrial action whatsoever, the union initiated court action to forestall

the new round of sackings. The grounds of the court case were not that the restructuring should be stopped but that the Fire Services Commission had failed to consult the union. The Employment Court upheld the union's case, and granted an interim injunction forcing the commission to enter into talks with the union.

A new restructuring formula emerged from the ensuing negotiations, but the union again returned to the courts last month, claiming that the Employment Court's earlier instructions to fully involve the union had not been met by the Fire Service. The latest plan has been put together with the complete involvement of the union.

The union has previously claimed that its forays into the courts have resulted in a "victory" for the firefighters. However, it is clear that the government is close to achieving its objectives. Internal Affairs Minister Jack Elder said that he was now "cautiously optimistic" about reaching a settlement. He claimed that there would be few redundancies under the new agreement simply because manning levels have deteriorated so much in the course of the dispute that the actual numbers of firefighters currently in the service now closely match those required under the initial proposals.



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