

Australian firefighters demand better death and disability pensions

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For the first time in over 15 years, firefighters in the Australian state of New South Wales have taken industrial action. Since the beginning of the month the fire services have been hit by a series of work bans and strikes. The industrial campaign is, at the moment, on hold while negotiations between the union and the NSW Labor government grind on.

Anyone who has ever spoken to a firefighter, professional or voluntary, knows that these workers take their responsibility for public safety very seriously. So what has driven over half of the state's professional 3,200 fire personnel to withdraw their services?

The issue is that in the case of injury or death—something firefighters face every day—neither they, nor their families, are properly provided for. The dispute has arisen because the state government has refused to rectify the enormous discrepancies in the death and disability benefits available to firemen, a legacy of the cost cutting carried out by previous governments.

The firefighters are currently covered by three separate government-run superannuation funds, in which the entitlements depend on the length of service in the brigade. A brief review reveals the intention of consecutive Liberal Party and Labor Party governments to eventually phase out full disability and death pensions for firefighters altogether.

Only those who joined the brigade before 1985 are covered by the original superannuation scheme where, in the event of death, a fireman's family would receive a lifetime pension of \$600 per fortnight. In the case of serious injury or disability, the fireman is entitled to a lifetime payment of \$900 every fortnight, adjusted to meet inflation.

Brigade members, who joined the service after 1986, and who work in equally dangerous conditions, are

covered by an inferior scheme. For accidents resulting in death there is a one-off payment of \$58,000, a sum equivalent to less than four years of the original superannuation fund. In the case of serious injury or disability, the scheme also provides for a one-off payment of \$58,000, equivalent to two and a half years of the original scheme. According to a union spokesman, there have been cases where men have been awarded as little as \$10,000 because their injury was not “perceived to be serious enough”.

The third and most recent fund is for firefighters who joined the service after 1993. For them, the benefits are even less. For death or serious injury and disability, there is a lump sum payment of \$54,000.

Firemen also face serious health risks that can lead to long-term illness, including cancer. A recent Worksafe report lists firemen as one of the categories of workers most likely to be exposed to a range of dangerous chemicals and fumes released by spills or combustion.

One of many substances is the chemical PCB, (a suspected cancer-causing agent) released from broken fluorescent tubes and other appliances common in most offices and factories. Exposure to the compound can cause, liver damage, respiratory disorders, thyroid gland disorders, muscle and joint pain, violent headaches, nausea and vomiting. Recent testing on animals showed that exposure to PCB causes birth defects, still births, and decreased post-natal survival. The report warned that anyone wishing to dispose of PCB should contact the appropriate State authority because, “ordinary incinerators are not effective”.

Dissatisfaction among firefighters has been brewing since 1994. The Fire Brigade Employees Union (FBEU) began negotiating with the NSW government in 1997, in response to concerns raised by rank-and-file members. Even as work stoppages erupted early this

month, FBEU President Darryl Snow complained: “We've been forced into this. The government has taken a firm line, one that falls short of equity.”

The action so far has included work bans and strike action by 1,600 firemen, (about half of the professional workforce) and a march by firefighters through Sydney to the state parliament. Firemen on the original scheme have not been called out on strike.

At a membership meeting at the Sydney Town Hall, a number of firemen spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Phil, who has 14 years with the Brigade, explained how he first became fully conscious of the consequences that flowed from the differing benefits. “During the bush fires of 1994, one of our blokes was hit on the head by a falling tree and received brain damage. We thought workers compensation covered us, but he only got \$18,000. This is when the differences in the schemes were really highlighted.”

Another fireman summed up the feeling of all firefighters at the meeting: “We are a service to society and we never want to have to use this coverage, because it means we will have been badly injured or worse. But we demand the best coverage should it occur.” Jeff, a firefighter of six years said that injured men faced a grim future. “I get no coverage and I would end up on the dole if I lose an arm or a leg.”

Medically-retired firefighter Garry Bartlett, 46, was forced to leave the service and received no benefits after shattering his knee. “Most people think that if you put your life at risk you are going to be looked after. It just doesn't happen like that. I am in chronic pain and have to walk with a cane. I shouldn't be working at all but I have to find work or lose the house.”

Another fireman said: “Everybody should be equal, our families should be looked after. My wife is a police officer and if anything happens to her, I'll be looked after for life. She will get nothing if the same happens to me.”

Prior to this year's state election, the NSW Labor Council and the unions called on public sector workers to throw their support behind the re-election of Labor despite its repeated cutbacks to public services.

Labor's contempt for the firefighters was highlighted in a letter from the Premier's Department, offering a “compromise” to the firemen. It stated that the government considered spouses should receive proper

and adequate cover, “only if the firefighter is fatally injured or is permanently injured as a result of being exposed to *special risk*.”

Firemen rejected the “offer,” concerned that the term *special risk* was to avoid any firm commitment to automatically pay benefits. The vagueness would ensure that future claims would become bogged down in long legal battles, the outcomes of which were usually inadequate lump sum settlements.

It is instructive to compare entitlements for firemen to those for politicians. On death, a NSW politician's family receives between 45 and 60 percent of the salary for a lifetime, indexed to subsequent pay increases. On disability, a politician gets 48 to 80 percent of his or her salary, again indexed to pay rises. The payouts for politicians are completely funded by taxpayers, whereas the two most recent schemes covering firefighters are funded solely by members' contributions.



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