

# Australian state government imposes fire station shut-downs

**Mark Church**  
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Despite the September 6 Bankstown apartment fire, the New South Wales (NSW) government has stepped up its cuts to the state's fire services by introducing the "temporary off-lining" (TOL) of fire stations. Across Sydney and other urban areas, numbers of fire stations are being temporarily shut down on a daily basis, in order to help reduce the NSW Fire and Rescue budget by a total of \$70 million over the next four years.

TOLing has been instituted to avoid paying overtime to cover staff shortages to keep stations operational. Entire stations are being placed on TOL if a single staff member goes on leave or is sick, rather than a replacement being called in.

As a result, the affected areas are no longer fully covered by fire services or specialised equipment, such as heavy trucks. Other stations are expected to cover these areas, but this adds vital minutes to response times.

The fatal fire at the Euro Terrace apartments in the Sydney suburb of Bankstown highlighted the potential dangers involved in lengthening response times. At the time of the fire, the local fire-fighting unit had been dispatched to another incident, so that the first units on the scene came from suburbs further away. They arrived just as two young women, both Chinese students, jumped from the fifth floor of the burning building. One died instantly, while the other was seriously injured. Had fire rescue services been closer at hand, they may have been able to save the students.

Already, fire stations have been shut down for periods all over the state. They include stations in the Sydney suburbs of Riverwood, Lane Cove and Miranda, as well as in the regional cities of Newcastle and Cessnock. In some instances, stations have been partially affected, with specialised equipment, such as heavy trucks, placed on shut-down. In one case, a collapsed balcony

at Brighton-Le-Sands was not responded to by a specialised truck in the nearby Sydney suburb of Hurstville because the station's truck was not online. Instead, it took just over an hour for a truck to arrive from Eastwood, which is 30 km away.

TOLing is also likely to lead to job losses among the state's 630-strong relieving force of reserve firefighters, who may no longer be called in to cover staffing shortages.

The previous state Labor government first suggested the introduction of TOLing, during negotiations in 2008 for a new workplace agreement with the Fire Brigade Employees Union (FBEU). At that time, the Fire Brigade management identified 32 fire stations it could shut down in the case of understaffing. During the negotiations, in the name of avoiding TOLing, the union agreed to reduce firefighters' annual leave in a bid to assist the Labor government cut costs.

This deal was just one of the many attacks on public sector workers' conditions, enforced by the trade unions, under the Labor government, that helped to pave the way for the current Liberal government. The Liberals came to office in 2011 on a wave of working class hostility to Labor's pro-business policies, then proceeded to intensify the cuts to public spending.

While making token public protests against the current \$70 million cuts, the FBEU has sought to help implement them. Initially, it proposed reduced overtime and then, in a letter to NSW Fire and Rescue chief Greg Mullins last July, suggested further measures, including the de-staffing of specialised fire equipment and the transfer of these crews to cover other stations.

In September, however, a special general meeting of union members strongly rejected, by 1,200 votes to 803, the agreement that the union had struck with the government, which included significant cuts to leave

entitlements and overtime. The vote was another sign of anger and resistance among firefighters, who had two months earlier held their first statewide strike since 1956, against the government's decision to slash workers' compensation entitlements.

On September 14, the issue was placed back in the hands of the state Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), where the FBEU hoped to hammer out an alternative agreement. Nevertheless, on November 5 the government unilaterally began to initiate TOLing. That move was initially halted by the IRC the following day, on the grounds that the union should have another chance to convince its members to agree to the cost-cutting proposal.

However, on November 9 the FBEU state committee decided not to take its agreement back to the membership for a new vote, admitting that it would only be defeated again. Instead, the union returned the dispute once more to the IRC, which removed the TOLing ban on November 16. Since then, the union has confined itself to media releases and other public objections, while giving instructions to firefighters on how to implement TOLing operations.

The FBEU has portrayed the imposition of TOLing as solely the responsibility of Premier Barry O'Farrell's government. It has made no mention of the role of the previous state Labor government or that of the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, which is spearheading the austerity drive being implemented by the states. Instead, the union has sought to divert the anger of its members, and the public, over TOLing into a campaign for the return of Labor governments, federal and state, that will only deepen the cuts.

Both the FBEU and the O'Farrell government have already indicated, during negotiations, that TOLing, even on top of cuts to overtime and leave entitlements, will not produce the \$70 million in savings demanded by the government. Moreover, as the global economic situation worsens, all the state governments are coming under increasing pressure from falling tax revenues, plus the demands of the financial markets and the Gillard government, to further slash public spending.

TOLing, and the cuts to come, will increase the danger of further tragedies, such as that in Bankstown on September 6. Fire fighters will be hampered in their ability to respond to serious emergencies, potentially

leading to needless deaths.



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