

16 September 2009

Hon. John Key
Prime Minister
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Dear Mr. Key,

I refer to your comments made to Union members at the opening of the new Mt. Roskill Fire Station and made on Newstalk ZB on 14 September.

Firefighters are very concerned at the obviously inadequate and at best misleading briefing you have received regarding the background to firefighters' current position regarding renewing their Collective Agreement.

The facts are:

1. Firefighters last received a pay increase on 1 January 2008 – some 21 months ago.
2. The present Collective Agreement expired on 31 December 2008 – some 9 months ago.
3. The Union initiated bargaining to renew the Collective Agreement in November 2008.
4. It was not until April 2009 that the Fire Service indicated it was able to bargain with the Union.
5. Current maximum hourly rates for the following firefighter ranks are:

Recruit Firefighter	\$10.743 an hour
Firefighter	\$12.351 an hour
Qualified Firefighter	\$15.655 an hour
Senior Firefighter	\$16.261 an hour
Station Officer	\$17.465 an hour
Senior Station Officer	\$18.148 an hour

6. It was in the context of these hourly rates that the Union formulated its initial pay claim. The Union's claim was to align the Recruit Firefighter hourly rate to the Minimum Hourly Rate. At the time the claim was made this was \$12.00 an hour; now \$12.50 an hour.

You can see how far below the Minimum Adult Rate both the Recruit Firefighter and Firefighter hourly rates are.

7. These hourly rates are used to calculate a weekly wage that factors in the shift system worked – 2 x 10 hour day shifts followed by 2 x 14 hour night shifts followed by 3 days off. This shift system averages out at 42 hours a week.

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8. This total weekly wage incorporates all additional payment for 2 hours overtime a week, for working weekends, public holidays and nights.

No additional payments are made when working on weekends or public holidays.

9. The maximum total weekly wage for firefighter ranks for working the prescribed shift system are:

Recruit Firefighter	\$694.31 a week	\$36,104 a year
Firefighter	\$794.82 a week	\$41,331 a year
Qualified Firefighter	\$1000.23 a week	\$52,012 a year
Senior Firefighter	\$1037.97 a week	\$53,974 a year
Station Officer	\$1117.62 a week	\$58,116 a year
Senior Station Officer	\$1160.06 a week	\$60,323 a year

10. You will see that these figures are well below what you have been advised of.
11. Any amounts earned over these amounts are as a result of working overtime – and very significant additional hours.
12. Firefighters are required to work these significant amounts of overtime to maintain prescribed minimum staffing levels – essentially to keep four firefighters on a fire appliance.
13. The reason for this need is that the establishment numbers of firefighters is totally inadequate to cover the 24/7 crewing requirements. If firefighters did not work this overtime, then fire appliances would become non-operational and be unable to respond to emergency incidents.
14. To achieve the remuneration the Fire Service claims, and presumably what you have based your comments on, a Senior Firefighter would need to work in excess of 90 hours a week every week of the year.
- A Station Officer would need to work in excess of 85 hours a week every week of the year.
15. If the figures supplied to you are correct – and the Union would strongly suggest they are not and are significantly inflated, they can only happen if grossly excessive hours of work are being required – certainly well in excess of the Fire Service’s own Hours of Work policy.
16. If this level of hours of work is required, then the 5 weeks holiday a firefighter receives (after 7 year’s service) would certainly be necessary.
17. Firefighters could of course refuse to work these excessive hours. As with any workers, they must consider a work/life balance. If the overtime was not worked however, many of our communities would be without emergency response cover.

Firefighters appreciate the time you have taken to read their side of the argument. Firefighters, more than most, are very aware of their responsibilities to the communities they serve with outstanding dedication. They are very well aware of the respect they are held in by the public and do not take this for granted.

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Firefighters simply want to settle a renewed Collective Agreement on a fair and just basis.

Once this is achieved, they can go back to doing what all firefighters want to do – protecting the communities they live in.

We are happy to discuss any of this directly with you at your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

DEREK BEST
SECRETARY