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Victoria pushing ahead with CFA deal

Friday, June 10, 2016, 4:13pm

Victoria's Andrews Labor Government has vowed to push through the controversial enterprise agreement covering its Country Fire Authority, despite sustaining political damage that has spilled into the federal election campaign.

State Cabinet today decided to support the deal recommended by the Fair Work Commission, which will cover about 800 professional CFA firefighters but is opposed by many of their 55,000 volunteers.

However, Emergency Services Minister Jane Garrett resigned rather than support the deal, even after Premier Daniel Andrews declared that extra protections had been included for volunteers.



Jane Garrett

@Jane_GarrettMP

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It has been an extraordinary privilege to serve in my ministerial role which I leave with a heavy heart.

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In a terse statement, Andrews said Garrett refused to support Cabinet proposals to end the long-running dispute, despite all concerns previously raised by her having been addressed.

The Deputy Premier, James Merlino, was quickly sworn in as the new Minister for Emergency Services and called on the CFA board to accept the enterprise agreement by 5pm today or resign.

"This bitter dispute has gone on for more than 1,000 days and unless we take decisive action it will go on for 1,000 more," Andrews said. "That is not leadership, that is not safe."

"I was not prepared, the Cabinet was not prepared, no fair-minded Victorian is prepared to continue to have this dispute drag on dangerously in a bitter and spiteful distraction from the important work of fighting fire and keeping our communities safe."

It has been alleged that ex-Minister Garrett was bullied by some firefighters over her stance.

Andrew argued that the government has agreed to important safeguards for the volunteers and for CFA management concerns that the United Firefighters Union would effectively have veto powers under the agreement.

The new Minister said the deal would see Victoria hire an extra 350 professional firefighters and allow the parties a "fresh start".

But the Volunteer Fire Brigade Victoria group won an interim injunction in the Victorian Supreme Court preventing the CFA board from signing the agreement until at last Tuesday.

The fate of the CFA board and chief executive Lucinda Nolan is still unclear.

The Cabinet accepted the recommendations of Fair Work Commissioner Julius Roe, but released a [package of measures](#) to meet the concerns of the CFA and volunteers.

The package includes inserting clauses into the agreement that specify that the role of volunteers and the services they provide are unchanged.

Other measures include a statement of intent between the CFA and UFU that:

- confirms that the enterprise agreement will not override the National Employment Standards such as the right to request flexible working arrangements;
- requires cooperation on a rule that seven professional firefighters must be dispatched to fires from the 34 fire stations with an "integrated" mix of employees and volunteers.

The Andrews Government will also seek a commitment that the parties will not "unreasonably" withhold consent after consultation.

It has appointed Emergency Management Commissioner Craig Lapsley to oversee the implementation of the agreement, and then release six and 12-month reports.

Andrews argued it was a "fair and balanced outcome" that respected the work of career and volunteer firefighters.

The CFA released a [legal opinion](#) from the Government's senior Crown counsel which reaffirmed there are parts of the agreement that remain unlawful.

The Authority also released the [proposed enterprise agreement](#), which runs to 405 pages.

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