

The Victorian firefighter dispute comes to a resolution, but for how long?

Written by David Hayward, Professor of Public Policy and Acting Director, VCROSS-RMIT Future Social Service Institute, RMIT University



Under the proposed reforms, the CFA will become a volunteer-only organisation. AAP/David Crosling

In announcing his proposed [fire service restructure](#), Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews will be hoping he has finally put an end to the state's [bitter firefighter dispute](#).

Two new fire services are to be created. One will be focused on urban areas and staffed by paid, professional firefighters; the other will be focused on non-urban areas with its firefighters drawn from volunteers only.

The model works well in New South Wales and tackles several structural problems that have bedevilled Victoria's fire services for decades.

The Country Fire Authority is designated as a volunteer service, yet it employs 1,200 paid firefighters. It is a rural fire service, yet its boundaries include 60% of the Melbourne metropolitan population and roughly half of Melbourne's suburbs as well as large non-metropolitan urban centres such as Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo.

These odd arrangements play out in awkward ways, particularly in the 35 integrated fire stations in which volunteers and paid firefighters work in tandem. These stations are typically in urban and increasingly densely populated locations.

During fires, paid and highly trained firefighters can find themselves reporting to volunteers, of vastly different levels of skill, training and experience. That doesn't sound sensible when lives and homes are on the line.

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These tricky problems were at the heart of the high profile battle between the Country Fire Authority, the United Firefighters Union and the Volunteer Fire Brigades over a new enterprise agreement that [came to a head](#) during last year's federal election.

The United Firefighters Union was pushing for a new agreement that would give paid firefighters much greater control over the way emergencies are handled – a proposal that was being bitterly resisted by management and the volunteers. The former bristled at losing control, and the latter felt like they were being treated like second-class citizens within a service that was meant to be for them.

After Andrews belatedly backed the union, Labor's emergency services minister, Jane Garrett, [resigned in protest](#), as did the CEO of the Country Fire Authority and its chief fire officer, while its recalcitrant board was [summarily dismissed](#).

Before the dust could settle, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull intervened earlier this year by [changing the Fair Work Act](#) in ways that made these new arrangements illegal. But they left the underlying problems unchanged and the paid firefighters' grievances unaddressed.

Turnbull's changes also created a management conundrum. It is [not possible under the new laws](#) for the Country Fire Authority's management team to negotiate a new enterprise agreement with its paid staff without first securing the agreement of the hostile volunteers.

The Victorian government's proposal neatly sidesteps Turnbull's Fair Work legislative hurdles. It also makes it possible for the stalled enterprise agreement to be implemented while enabling the volunteers to have a dedicated service focused on them.

The state government's coffers are full, and Treasurer Tim Pallas admitted during the recent budget lockup that he had set aside funds to make these new arrangements a reality. There is [talk of A\\$100 million](#)

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. Money will not be a problem, but that does not mean the new proposal will succeed.

It must first get through the Victorian parliament, and the opposition will almost certainly will get in the way. Labor does not control the upper house and its lower house majority is down to one.

The volunteers are likely to be unhappy about losing their paid colleagues, who under current arrangements are there to support them. Whether they agree with the proposal will probably depend on how much money Pallas is willing to spend to make up for what is being taken away.

A restructure of the type being proposed will have one other potentially beneficial effect. It is no secret that the relationship between the United Firefighters Union and the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board is at rock bottom, and has been that way for some time. The recently completed review of the fire services concluded that this needed to end, and what better way to make that happen than the formation of a [brand new Fire Rescue Service](#) .

The new organisational arrangements will not resolve all the tensions. There will still be a need along the borders of the city and the bush for paid firefighters to work co-operatively with volunteers under a single command structure, if not in aggregate than certainly at the scene.

Andrews' plan to secure a lasting firefighter peace has much to recommend it, but whether it succeeds is difficult to predict. His government has proven adept at developing good policy, but it has a strange knack of allowing politics to keep getting in the way.

David Hayward has previously received research funding from the United Fire Fighters Union, most recently to prepare a submission to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009). He also has been awarded funding by the Victorian government for research, education and training purposes.

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