



100th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING MINUTES

Thursday 21 October 2010
Overseas Passenger Terminal, Circular Quay, Sydney

The President, Comrade Sullivan declared the Union's 100th Annual General Meeting open at 1310 hours and welcomed the more than twelve hundred assembled members, officials and numerous guests to the meeting and Centenary Function to follow. Comrade Sullivan paid tribute to the thousands of FBEU members, past and present, who had helped form and build the Union from its humble beginnings in October 1910 before inviting the State Secretary, Comrade Casey, to deliver his annual report to members.

Comrade Casey then addressed the meeting:

"Comrades and friends.

A State Secretary's report is something that always takes a little thought to prepare. Trying to produce one that does justice to our 100 years of history has proven a challenging task.

We are the oldest firefighters union in the world. Firefighters in Sydney were the first anywhere to organise to force the employer treat them with dignity – the first to stand up and say "no more". This is no small thing. Before London, before New York, before Melbourne – it was us.

Today we have marched through the streets of Sydney to celebrate our Union. We now stand here, in this magnificent venue, looking out over Sydney Harbour.

In 1910 things were very different. Firefighters worked a 168 hour week – essentially seven days straight. On the eighth day they had 24 hours off. They could not leave the station area without permission from the boss. They had to ask permission to marry. They were forbidden to gamble. They were required to live on the station. They were required to clean their officers clothing and accommodation. They were poorly paid by the standards of the time, and they worked in incredibly unsafe conditions.

Conditions were so poor that many of the firefighters were ex-sailors, as they were the only workers who were used to such harsh discipline.

Predictably there were some who refused to be treated like this, and who began to organise a union. Jim Lambert (State Secretary from 1946 – 1968) joined the job and the union in 1928. He recalled that old hands then talked of the first union meetings being held in Hyde Park, or under a street lamp on Goulburn St. The first activists organised this Union by bicycle, clocking up hundreds of kilometers in any given week. Management ran the line that firefighters should not have a union – that as emergency service workers they had no right to organise on the job. Union members were victimised, so it took a lot of bravery to stand up and have a go. In many countries today that is still the case today for firefighters.

So in 1910 we needed a Union. And a handful of dedicated men, and they were all men, went out and built one.

The defining fight for the first 75 years of our history was the battle to reduce the hours of the working week to a manageable level.

In 1910 it was 168 hrs.

The first breakthrough was 1913, where the working week was reduced to 138 hrs.

In 1920 they managed 120 hours.

In 1927 it was 84.

78 hours by 1938.

56 hours by 1945.

And on the back of strike action they managed to finally attain the 40 hour week in 1955.

It took a further two decades to attain the 10/14 roster that we enjoy today.

Over the last hundred years we have come a long way. Firefighters have collectively transformed this job. From a job that was a byword for harsh and unreasonable, it is today the last of the blue-collar careers.

Everything we enjoy has been fought for, and won, by those who have gone before us. I have spoken about the hours, but it goes so much deeper than that.

Take safe minimum crewing. Safe minimum crewing of four on a pump is like a law to me. I wouldn't ride on an appliance with less – and I know that I am not alone here in saying that. But that was won in 1983 on the back of concerted action by the Union. It took until 1987 for safe minimum crewing to be introduced on all metropolitan pumps. It took until 1999 for Broken Hill to achieve it. Some states still haven't won it. On any given day in Melbourne there are pumpers rolling with SO & 2. But it doesn't happen here, because we don't let it happen here.

I could go on and talk about PPE, about appliances, about station amenities, about fighting to keep stations open or to open new ones - but rather than do that I'd encourage serving members to talk to the retired members about how the job has changed, and when and how those changes happened. They know the stories better than I do, because they lived them. It was their activity that created the job we all joined.

That's the bread and butter of what we do as a union. I want to talk about something a little more nebulous now, but no less important.

Dignity.

You have all worked other jobs, and you all have families and friends employed outside of the Brigades. The unique nature of our Union defines how we are treated at work. Management cannot simply rule by diktat. They cannot ride roughshod over us, as they most certainly did in the past. As a Union we have a degree of job control that is very much the exception to the rule in 2010.

We are out of step with the rest of the organised working class. And proudly so. The collective control we have over our job is exceptional. Name me another industry in this country where the workforce,

as a group, wields as much power. Through our militancy - and through good, smart, politics - we have inherited, and continue to build, something extraordinary.

With that power comes responsibility. When others are standing up for a fair go we need to stand up and support them. The FBEU has a long and proud history of solidarity with other unions, with the peace movement, with the movement for social change. We are strong enough that we can, and should, offer support to those who are struggling to achieve the dignity at work, or in the community, we take for granted.

I've spoken a lot about our strength. And rightly so.

But we're not bullet proof. There is a basic tension that runs through fire brigades the world over between those who fight the fires and those who manage the service. My predecessor Frank Bryce, State Secretary between 1968 and 1985, captured this when he wrote

"The Union continues to seek better conditions of employment and job satisfaction for its members, and the Fire Brigade endeavors to fulfill its responsibilities in providing fire protection for the community at the cheapest possible price – and so, the class struggle between the worker and the employer continues."

These words have been true for as long as firefighters have been paid, and it isn't going to change anytime soon. There is a conflict at the heart of the Brigade between the men and women who do this for a living, and the governments that want us to do it on the cheap.

In London this Saturday our comrades in the FBU are striking for eight hours. The employer is trying to change the roster system, and is intending to sack all firies and rehire them on contracts to achieve this.

In preparation for this dispute the employer has taken 25 pumps out of stations in order for them to be staffed by scab labour.

We need to ask ourselves are we ready to face a fight like that. How would we respond? If the London firies lose their blue the lesson won't be lost on our bosses here. Industrial relations knows no borders. I encourage all of you to think this through. We will be facing a new government next year that will be attempting to cut back expenditure on the public sector. For us, that means either compromising on wages and conditions, or using every weapon in our arsenal to ensure that it cannot be done.

So now, at our Centenary AGM, what is the state of our Union?

We're as strong industrially as we have ever been. Every permanent and 85% of the retained are members. While things are not perfect, we have improved internal communication in the Union, and begun the process of training and resourcing the station delegates properly. There is money in the bank – our financial position is as good as it ever has been. We have expanded the staff of the Union significantly over the last three months, to better prepare for the struggles to come.

On any estimation we are a formidable union. We are united, we are organised, and we're not afraid to have a go. I said earlier that we are out of step with the rest of the labour movement. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are out in front of them. We have to be prepared to fight to hold onto that.

Our muscle comes from our collective strength. But we are a Union that doesn't just deliver the big hits – we are also capable of boxing smart. And it's appropriate now to recognise those who make the Union work day-to-day and week-to-week.

Firstly, the State Committee. The current Committee is a dedicated and sharp group of men. They are: Darin Sullivan; Travis Broadhurst; Matt Murray; Tim Anderson; Andy Coppin; Wes Smith; Marty Dixon; Jason Morgan; Terry Kirkpatrick; Ken Smith; Luke Russell; Stuart Holt; and Terry Farley.

It is both a privilege and a pleasure to work with them.

To the Sub-Branch executives, the station delegates, and the activists – on behalf of the rest of the rank and file I thank you. Without that layer of local leaders we would have nothing.

To the staff of the Union – we all owe you. Most members will never be aware of the work that they perform. With a handful of dedicated industrial and administrative staff we successfully face off against the Department’s massive resources. No one works for the FBEU for the earn or for a bludge. They do it because they care. Thank you.

And most importantly – those who have gone before us.

Make no mistake comrades – we stand on the shoulders of giants. In often terrible conditions our forbears stood up and fought for their dignity as workers. Every day we step onto a station we are reaping the rewards of their struggle.

Which means we have a responsibility to make sure that their efforts are recognised, defended, and expanded. It is my ambition to leave this job better than I found it – out of respect for those who went before me, out of respect for myself and my trade, and as a legacy for the men and women yet to join the job.

Finally, on a personal note. To stand here today before you is the greatest honour of my life. Today is a day of celebration of the past, and a day to reflect about where the future will lead us. I look forward to standing shoulder to shoulder with all of you in the struggles to come.

Thank you.”

Comrade Casey concluded his speech to the acclamation of the meeting, whereupon the Chair then directed the meeting’s attention to the remaining agenda items.

The Union’s Centenary

It was then

Moved: Com. J. Casey

Seconded: Com. G. Matthews

“That this, our 100th Annual General Meeting in this, our centenary year, is an opportunity to reflect on the past, on the initiative and endeavour that brought us to a position of being the oldest, and one of the best organised firefighters’ unions in the world. That in 2010 we continue to hold 100% membership density amongst the permanent firefighters of NSW, from the most recent Recruit to the Commissioner, is a testament to our ongoing strength. That we today hold over 80% membership density amongst the State’s predominantly rural-based retained firefighters is truly remarkable.

Part of the lesson of our past success has been our willingness to take direct action when needed; to be responsive and innovative; and to anticipate both the opportunities and threats before us. We have a been strong Union, but we have also been a clever one.

Just as we celebrate our past successes, our centenary year is an opportunity to nurture the foundations for our future.

*Our emphasis on our solidarity, on the commitment and engagement of our members, on the important work we do for the community, is part of this.
This is at the core of who we are as an organisation.*

In June 1957, retiring President and later Life Member, Comrade Harry Evans, gave this parting advice to members:

‘You must pull together in unity and through the Union put forward your demands. More can be gained by peaceful negotiation than from the Industrial Commission, but should negotiation break down, then the militant struggle must be resumed. You must beware of sectarianism in all its forms. The Union must operate for the benefit of the majority, not the minority.’

This meeting recognises that this analysis holds as true today as it did over half a century ago, and anticipates that it will continue do so well into our second century.

In our centenary year, we take pride in our struggle so far and look ahead with confidence, determination and enthusiasm.”

Comrade Matthews then spoke in support of the motion in an address which recognised the close and historic bonds between the Union’s retained and permanent members, following which the question was put and declared

Carried

FBEU 25 Years Membership Medal

It was then

Moved: Com. J. Casey

Seconded: Com. G. Mullins

“That this meeting endorses the striking of a 25 Years Membership Medal in this, the Union’s Centenary year, to be henceforth awarded upon the State Committee of Management so resolving to members who attain 25 years membership of the Union and further, that this Medal take the same form as the draft artwork presented to this meeting, being of circular design and fashioned, on the observe side, on the Union’s foundation badge and on the reverse side, to read “25 YEARS MEMBERSHIP”, and is to be suspended on a bar and 32mm riband of five myrtle and cardinal stripes of equal width, each stripe signifying five years’ membership.”

Comrade Mullins then spoke in support of the motion, confirming that if the motion was adopted then he would, as NSWFB Commissioner, approve the wearing of the 25 Years Membership Medal with NSWFB uniform, following which the question was put and declared

Carried

A New National Voice

It was then

Moved: Com. J. Casey

Seconded: Com. H. Cloutson

“That this, our 100th Annual General Meeting in this, our centenary year, recognises the need for the establishment of a new national body to effectively represent the industrial and political interests of firefighters and in doing so, commits the FBEU to actively support the establishment and ongoing operation of such an organisation.”

Comrade Clouston then spoke in support of the motion, following which the question was put and declared

Carried

Adoption of Minutes

It was then

Moved: Com. J. Casey

Seconded: Com. H. Clouston

“That the draft minutes of the 100th Annual General Meeting held today, 21 October 2010, as tabled and circulated at this meeting be received, noted and adopted as a true and correct record of this meeting.”

Carried

There being no further business, the President, Comrade Sullivan declared the meeting closed at 1350 hours and thanked the members present for their attendance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Darin Sullivan', with a horizontal line underneath.

**Darin Sullivan
President and Chair
21 October 2010**