



Thursday 25 June 2020

Committee Secretary
Economics and Governance Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

Delivered via email: egc@parliament.qld.gov.au

Dear Chair

Re: Inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19

1. I refer to the 'Inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19' (the inquiry) currently being conducted by the Economics and Governance Committee (the EGC). I commend the Palaszczuk Government on the inquiry and thank the EGC for the opportunity to provide a submission.
2. The United Firefighters' Union of Australia, Union of Employees, Queensland (the union) is a registered industrial organisation with coverage that includes paid full-time professional firefighters (and fire communication officers) in Queensland, and as such has a membership of approximately 2500 members.
3. The experience of our members in recent years regarding the increasing response demands being placed on them to prevent, prepare and plan for, respond to and assist in recovery of all natural and man-made disasters in Queensland (and inter-state and internationally) is that there is a chronic shortage of front line full-time professional firefighters and fire communication officers to meet current demands.
4. Current shortages limit capacity for the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (the QFRS) to comprehensively respond to what is clearly a trend upwards in the frequency, intensity and duration of the sort of disasters Queensland is likely to face in the coming months of 2020 and in coming years.
5. An example of the practical reality of the desperate shortage of full-time professional firefighters is the ever-increasing practice of QFRS requiring firefighters to be 'called back' from annual leave to be deployed to emergency responses or to backfill the gaps in station rosters due to other firefighters being deployed. Calling these firefighters back from annual leave not only reduces their access to annual leave (the quantum of which is protected in the Queensland Employment Standards within the *Industrial*

Relations Act – 2016 (Queensland)), but also reduces their time away from work on leave, which a multitude of studies show as crucial to maintain both the psychological and physical health of workers in high intensity and high risk working environments.

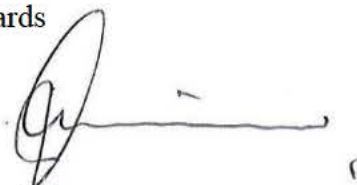
6. As the current climate emergency continues to escalate, the response requirements placed upon UFUQ members is predicted to increase. As such, there is an immediate need for a significant increase in the number of full-time professional firefighters (and a requisite lift in the numbers of fire communication officers) in Queensland. This increase in numbers will allow for a more comprehensive response capacity within QFRS (and will also assist in QFRS meeting its legal obligations to ensure annual leave is provided to its employees).
7. In short, the Queensland Government's COVID-19 response efforts are, without doubt, at risk of being significantly hampered by what is clearly a trend of natural disasters increasing in both frequency and intensity.
8. As such, I provide this submission to the inquiry on behalf of the existing firefighters of Queensland, and on behalf of the communities they protect.
9. The inquiry Terms of Reference require the EGC to consider '*the Queensland Government's response to COVID-19 in relation to the economic response only*'.
10. The Queensland Treasury and Department of State Development, Manufacturing, Infrastructure and Planning Public Hearing/Briefing (treasury) 'note' dated 7 May 2020, at paragraph 76, under the heading 'Planning for the State's economic recovery', states –

76. Agility and coordinated efforts will be key to economic recovery and to respond to any further waves of infection, particularly in an environment where global growth remains weak and private investment is likely to be low.
11. The UFUQ position is that current numbers of full-time professional firefighters available to respond to an increase in demand due to natural and man-made disasters is below that which would provide QFRS with a best-practice capacity to work in and with Queensland communities on efforts to prevent, prepare and plan for, fight, and respond and recover from, natural and man-made disasters.
12. There is only one solution that addresses this shortfall that also best protects the Queensland Government's COVID-19 response efforts with regard to economic recovery. That solution is immediate COVID-19 related funding for an increase in full time professional firefighter (and the requisite number of fire communication officer) numbers.
13. There can be no doubt that any natural disaster is going to add to the existing economic impact of COVID-19, including personal, community and infrastructure cost. Any additional layers of economic impact on Queensland would be devastating, given the costs that COVID-19 has already brought to bear.
14. QFRS must be able to provide the highest level of assistance to Queenslanders and their communities to ensure those added economic costs are minimised through the

QFRS response capacity, and an immediate increase in full-time professional firefighter numbers would put QFRS and the Queensland Government in the best position to minimise the costs associated with what cannot be disputed as impending natural (and man-made) disasters.

15. The UFUQ consider it necessary for the Queensland Government to make immediate budgetary provisions in line with COVID-19 responses to ensure economic stability to enable QFRS to –
 - a) immediately make arrangements for an intake of 350 full time firefighters in addition to both existing numbers and current recruitment to manage attrition. The recruitment of this additional number needs to commence immediately and occur between 2020 and 2024 (this number includes an increase to the requisite ratio of fire communication officers). This is an essential short-term cost to minimise (and likely in some circumstances completely prevent) the economic cost to the unavoidable coming natural disasters Queensland will face whilst working together to overcome the ongoing economic cost caused by the necessary controls put in place to manage COVID-19; and
 - b) commencing in 2024, recruit a further 350 full-time professional firefighters in addition to the existing numbers at that time; and
 - c) plan for the required capital works programs for Queensland regional and urban QFRS stations and other necessary infrastructure (such as fire appliances) through the commitment for an approximate \$100m funding for those works.
16. QFRS have in place existing recruitment and training facilities that can be scaled up to handle this necessary increase in the quantum of recruits being trained.
17. I and other representatives of the UFUQ seek to work with the Queensland Government to assist QFRS to enable the immediate increase to occur. I, along with members and UFUQ colleagues, am also available to provide further detail on the information provided in this submission and I seek to be heard further on the matter by the EGC.
18. Please note that the UFUQ intends to publish to our members this correspondence and any responses or further work the EGC engages the UFUQ in, unless the EGC requests the matters remain confidential.
19. I can be contacted at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED] and look forward to the opportunity to speak with the EGC about this matter.

Regards



John Oliver
General Secretary