

Firefighter stoush: Secret report for CFA reveals anti-union ambitions

- Nick Toscano, Richard Willingham

The Country Fire Authority commissioned a secret report that recommends thwarting the union presence in the organisation, abolishing its influence over decisions and hiring firefighters on non-union individual contacts.

The leaked report, obtained by Fairfax Media, was commissioned by the CFA to "review its existing workplace relations arrangements" and to reset its relationship with the United Firefighters Union.



The CFA dispute has dogged the Andrews government *Photo: Jessica Shapiro*

The CFA had been locked in a bitter workplace dispute with the militant firefighters' union since 2013, with management resisting union claims, which firefighters said would enhance community and staff safety.

The report, marked "strictly confidential" and legally privileged, was prepared in March this year by Seyfarth Shaw Australia, the law firm that was also used by the former Coalition state government to press recommendations to the royal commission into union corruption.

It lays out a slew of hardline measures for the CFA to "start driving the desired change now" towards a model of reduced union power in the workplace, including hiring firefighters on "individual and/or non-union" agreements.

Since the report was given to the CFA, the board has been sacked by the Andrews government, with chief executive Lucinda Nolan also quitting her post

Other recommendations to tackle union influence include reducing union officials' rights of entry into CFA workplaces and cracking down on strike pay.

"There is an opportunity to withhold payments in respect to partial work bans," the document says.

"There may also be a basis to press to recover certain payments made to date."

The document says that the union has been "operating independently from the lawful boundaries of its role" and advises management to challenge some industrial action.

"The UFU has advanced various demands that would further compromise the capacity of the CFA to meet its operational objectives, and a substantial wage claim," it says.

And it recommends that the CFA engage in myth-busting to counter misinformation.

"Do this in a public and visible way [UFU statement vs truth] to erode confidence in the union agenda," it says.

The former CFA board and the volunteer firefighters' association have argued that the new agreement hands too much power to the United Firefighters Union, and undermines the CFA's management capacity and the role of volunteers.

"The current model of engagement at the CFA is that of traditional, captive workplace. The objective of this process is to drive towards a more progressive approach," the document says.

UFU secretary Peter Marshall said the secret report – commissioned under former minister Jane Garrett's watch – laid bare why the CFA board was dismissed and senior officials resigned.

"The CFA board's failure to deliver an enterprise agreement for three years is not just incompetence. This has been a Liberal Party campaign to bust union representation," Mr Marshall said.

"The report recommends the CFA take actions to 'erode public confidence in the union agenda'.

"Our agenda is protecting Victorian communities and making sure career and volunteer firefighters get home safe to their families after serving at a fire event."

"The CFA board was plotting to deunionise while ignoring the thousands of volunteer and career employees who were being poisoned at their own training facility in Fiskville."

Ms Nolan told a parliamentary inquiry on Tuesday that the request to [Seyfarth Shaw](#) was about how to resolve the workplace impasse, not to bust the union.

She said it was "nonsense" to suggest that she wanted to destroy the union.

It is understood that Ms Garrett had no knowledge of the report.

