

ACT firefighters reject pay rise, set to vote on industrial action

By [Blake Foden](#)

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Talking points

- Firefighters rejected a 10 per cent pay rise as part of bargaining agreement negotiations.
- They want the money to be invested in the fire service instead.
- The union says an extra 204 urban firefighters - a 59 per cent increase - are needed in the next four years.

Canberra firefighters look set to vote on taking industrial action after rejecting a 10 per cent pay rise, as their union warns ACT Fire and Rescue needs an extra 204 firefighters to service the city in the next four years.

The United Firefighters Union's ACT branch lodged an application for a protected action ballot order with the Fair Work Commission on Tuesday, having failed to agree on several issues despite 26 enterprise bargaining agreement meetings with the Emergency Services Agency since April 2017.



United Firefighters Union ACT branch secretary Greg McConville, who says firefighters want the money offered to them in pay rises to instead be invested in the fire service. KARLEEN MINNEY

The commission must rule on the application by Thursday. Should it proceed, the Australian Electoral Commission will conduct a ballot, giving union members a chance to vote on whether to take industrial action.

The union's ACT branch secretary, Greg McConville, said firefighters would still respond to incidents and any action would not compromise public safety.

He said union members rejected the agency's offer of a 10 per cent pay rise in December because they wanted the money to instead be invested in the fire service.

"The disagreement is about what's necessary to put in an agreement to ensure that community safety is protected," Mr McConville said.

Mr McConville said half the pay rise offer was contingent on removing the requirement that the Emergency Services Agency must agree with the union on standards concerning fire stations, uniforms and protective clothing, recruitment and training issues.

He said the remainder of the pay rise was offered in exchange for removing workers' compensation make-up pay, allowing the recruitment of senior officers from other jurisdictions ahead of local candidates, and consenting to the introduction of mandatory health and fitness assessments for firefighters.

"We would prefer that instead of putting money in firefighters' pockets, [as an incentive] for them to give up conditions, that the government invest in community safety to support a modern fire service for the ACT," Mr McConville said.

"What we're saying with the 10 per cent [pay rise] offer is that we think it's more important for that to go into additional firefighters, additional equipment and training for firefighters."

Mr McConville said the union was seeking "a package to create a modern fire service for the ACT", including an extra 204 firefighters during the lifespan of the next four-year bargaining agreement.

He said the additional firefighters were needed for a variety of reasons, including to staff new fire stations in the city and the Molonglo Valley, an upgraded Ainslie Fire Station and ACT Fire and Rescue's new aerial pumper appliance.

ACT Fire and Rescue has an available budget for 344 firefighters. An extra 204 would take the total to 548 – a 59 per cent increase in the workforce.

The union is also pushing for the new bargaining agreement to include improved training and mandatory skills assessments for firefighters, a firefighter wellbeing package, and minimum standards for fire station construction and renovation.



ACT Emergency Services Agency commissioner Dominic Lane, who says the agency has sought an urgent meeting with the United Firefighters Union. JAMILA TODERAS

In a statement, Emergency Services Agency commissioner Dominic Lane said the agency had sought an urgent meeting with the union to clarify some of the proposed forms of industrial action.

"The ESA will also be seeking the union's assurance that these actions will not affect public safety," Mr Lane said.

"The ESA will continue to work with the [union], and will abide by any Fair Work Commission rulings."

The United Firefighters Union has more than 330 members in the ACT.

For industrial action to take place, more than half the union's eligible members would have to vote in a protected action ballot, and more than half of those taking part would need to vote in favour of industrial action.

Mr McConville said the forms of industrial action proposed by the union included placing limitations on work in ways that would reduce output and efficiency.

He said firefighters might also display union campaign material in the workplace, and stop work to communicate with the public and the media about why they were taking industrial action.

"No industrial action will affect public safety," Mr McConville said.

"That would be against the ethos of our membership and against the law."



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