



## Louise Staley MP State Member for Ripon

### **Fair Work Amendment (Respect for Emergency Services Volunteers) Bill 2016 Submission to the Education and Employment Legislation Committee**

Thank-you for the opportunity to make a short submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee about the Fair Work Amendment (Respect for Emergency Services Volunteers) Bill 2016. I write in my capacity as the Victorian State MP for the seat of Ripon.

Ripon covers an area of 16,761km<sup>2</sup> stretching from the western outskirts of Ballarat to Stawell and then north to Donald and Wedderburn. Ripon is home to some of the most bushfire prone country in the world and has burned repeatedly in recent years.

To protect the people, property, and environment of Ripon there are greater than 90 CFA brigades comprised entirely of volunteers. Many of these brigades pre-date the formation of the CFA in the 1940s. For example, I recently attended the 153<sup>rd</sup> AGM of the Maryborough Fire Brigade.

The importance of the fire brigades to the people and property of the area has been repeatedly highlighted in the Victorian Hansard. Perhaps most notably, Sir Henry Bolte used his entire maiden speech to talk about fire and fire brigades. His remarks were still apt when I rose to make my inaugural speech in December 2014.

*Sixty-seven years ago almost to the day the then new MP for the seat of Hampden rose to his feet and began by saying, 'I had no desire to make my maiden effort this side of Christmas, but on travelling in the country I find the fire danger is so great this year that those of us who represent country electorates must stress the importance of fire control and prevention'. I can only echo Sir Henry Bolte's lament. Ripon is bone dry this year. The season has generally been poor, and in some parts has failed entirely. Farmers are carting water to stock, some daily, some weekly, at significant cost.*

*In Ripon, like other parts of rural Victoria, we are dependent on the Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers to fight the fires that come to a greater or lesser extent every year. The previous government opened 250 fire stations in four years, the largest single investment in rural fire brigades in Victoria's history. During the election campaign I was fortunate to meet some of the dedicated volunteers at fire station openings. Some of these volunteers have clocked up 50 years of service—50 years of turnouts, fundraisers, burn-offs, meetings, training days away on strike teams, time away from family and farm business.*

*Returning to Sir Henry's then 'maiden' speech: he lamented that the chief limitation on the brigades was their lack of local control. I warn the new government about its plans to assert union control over the CFA. The effect of this will not be CFA fireys standing in polling booths in made-up costumes; it will be the quiet yet devastating resignation from the CFA of thousands of volunteers. As Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria said in advertisements on 26 November 2014, Labor policy 'has the potential to destroy the CFA'. I call on the government to abandon this flawed attempt to pay off union mates.*

The volunteers in the fire brigades in Ripon not only fight fires. As a recent example, the Inglewood and Bridgewater brigades were first responders, within minutes, to a tanker rollover at Inglewood where power lines were downed and more than 40,000 litres of petrol and diesel spilled onto the Calder Highway. These brigade members are first responders and can never be replaced by career firefighters due to the sparse population density and large distances.

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Western Victoria, like most of country Victoria, will always be dependent on volunteer fire brigades. Therefore any actions which diminish volunteer control of the CFA, such as by inserting “consultation committees” made up of unionists and requiring consensus decision-making must be rejected. It is deeply disturbing that despite the previous CFA Board, the previous Minister, the Victorian Human Rights Commission, the Supreme Court and many experts all concluding the proposed CFA EBA will harm volunteers, that the Andrews Labor Government is determined to push ahead with this course of action.

I support the Bill and urge its speedy passage.