

Staffing with permanent firemen becomes necessary at the stage when the residential district of a city or town moves so far from the business centre that the volunteer firemen can no longer be assembled in time to deal adequately with fires in the high-risk area. In the early years of the Service, continuous duty over long hours by the permanent staff was general. When ideas of what were reasonable labour conditions altered, most countries adopted the shift system, while in New Zealand it was found possible to give relief by providing a higher standard of living accommodation for the single men and family quarters for the married firemen.

14. So far as the firemen themselves are concerned, the men on platoon system live away from the stations, and by some this is regarded as an advantage. It is one which will depend largely on the housing and transport conditions existing at any time. On the other hand, the New Zealand conditions, as amended by the Tribunal in June, 1947, set a very high standard. The basic wages determined by the Arbitration Court are comparable with those in industry. Residential accommodation is of a high standard. Full uniform is provided. No overtime is paid, but instead the men receive a night, week-end, and holiday duty allowance of 17s. per week. Married men receive either free house, lighting, and firing or, if not provided with quarters, an allowance of £2 0s. 9d. per week. Extended leave of eight weeks per year is given and day leave every third day during duty periods. It is noted that these improved conditions will involve the employment of additional permanent men, the number depending on the extent to which housing is provided.

15. There is something to be said for both systems. It would be both costly and inconvenient in the large cities of the world to provide residential accommodation except in the suburban areas. The urban transport systems, moreover, normally permit the firemen to live many miles from their duty station. All that is required for platoon operation is an engine-room, dormitory for the night crew, and suitable stores, offices, and lavatories. The number of men required, and therefore the wages cost, is higher, but this is offset to some extent by the lower overhead and maintenance on buildings. In New Zealand we are committed to the continuous-duty system by the extensive provision of living accommodation adapted to this form of duty which has been provided over the last thirty years. If we were now to change over to the platoon system, the additional cost of the residential stations would be lost without any compensating benefit.

16. The purpose of this review is to stress the desirability of determining some long-term policy for Service conditions. The agreement arrived at between the Fire Boards and the unions, which was confirmed by the Tribunal referred to, has a currency of three years only. It is based on the maintenance of the continuous-duty system. The Boards undertook to proceed with the housing programme, and the housing-allowance payable to married men not provided with family quarters is a penal one designed to enforce compliance with this undertaking. Proposals for new housing are already under consideration at Whangarei, Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, Masterton, Palmerston North, Wellington, Lower Hutt, and Timaru, but a major expenditure of the order contemplated would not be justified if the duty system is liable to change on the expiration of a three-year agreement. The Fire Boards, therefore, are justified in asking that, as custodians of public funds, they should be safeguarded by some provision in the new legislation defining the basis of Fire Service duty for which they are to provide.

VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES

17. Another controversy which has had a very unsettling effect on the Fire Service for some years past, and which came to a head during the year, concerns the status of the volunteer fire brigades. It originally arose through an agreement by the Wellington Fire Board in conciliation to the inclusion in the Wellington City award of conditions applying to "part-time firemen." The term was not defined in the award, but by consent of the Board was applied to the auxiliary firemen in the Wellington Brigade.