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AMO Board Confirms Support for Double Hatter Firefighters

AMO's Board will continue to advocate for an end to union interference in the off-duty activities of Ontario's firefighters.

At its August 14, 2014 meeting, AMO's Board confirmed their continued support for Ontario's double hatters.

Double hatters are full-time, professional firefighters that work as volunteer firefighters during off-duty hours. The International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) forbids this practice and can put firefighters "on trial" for violating union rules. Since many municipalities can only employ card-carrying union members based on collective agreement restrictions, the threat of being put on "trial" and the loss of union membership is ultimately a threat of job termination.

Understandably, most double hatters resign their volunteer position when threatened with job loss. This has happened on many occasions in a variety of municipalities.

Double hatters play an important role in keeping hundreds of Ontario municipalities safe. They provide fire protection services in small municipalities that do not require and could not possibly afford a full-time, salaried fire department. They also play a critical role in larger, sprawling municipalities, like Hamilton and Ottawa, where volunteers are needed within their composite fire services.

Municipalities pay for the cost of training new volunteer firefighters. Many volunteers use that training to secure a full-time firefighting job while maintaining a volunteer position with the municipality that provided the training. Property taxpayers in larger municipalities often benefit from the training provided by smaller municipalities.

The union's actions interfere with their own members' freedom of association – something we would think they would want to protect. They argue that double hatters weaken collective bargaining. They also argue that it is a health and safety issue and that double hatting is physically taxing. However, it is common for firefighters to have part-time jobs on their off-duty time that are physically difficult, such as construction and contracting. The reality is, double hatters allow many communities to benefit from the expertise of full-time firefighters on an on-call basis.

The union is using its power against good people, for political reasons. The union's position effectively means that firefighters can do anything they want in their free time, except what they are trained to do.

The cost to replace all of Ontario's double hatters with new volunteers is staggering from both a public safety and financial perspective. It's simply not a reality for many municipalities that are working hard to provide high quality services to the community and invest in infrastructure.

Has the union interfered in the activities of your municipality's volunteer firefighters? We are looking for more local examples of double hatters being threatened with job loss. If you would like to confidentially share your story, please contact Monika Turner, Director of Policy.

Gary McNamara
AMO President
Mayor, Town of Tecumseh

Municipalities, Not Unions, Should Determine How to Deliver Local Fire Protection Services

Double hatters are full-time, professional firefighters that work as volunteer firefighters during off-duty hours.

The practice of double hatting is forbidden by the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), the trade union representing professional firefighters in Canada and the United States. AMO is advocating for legislative changes that would end union interference in the off-duty volunteer firefighting activities of Ontario's firefighters.

Double hatter firefighters can be put on "trial" by the Association and, if convicted, may have their union membership revoked. Given that many municipalities can only employ card-carrying union members, the union's actions represent an effort to terminate highly trained and respected firefighters, simply because they wish to volunteer to serve their home communities in their free time. The union's actions are unduly interfering with their own member's freedom of association – something we would think they would want to protect.

Double hatters bring substantial experience to fire services in many Ontario communities that do not require and cannot afford a full-time, salaried department. They often take on a leadership role while they work to ensure the safety of their family, friends and community where they live.

Double hatters also play an important role in larger, sprawling municipalities like Hamilton and Ottawa where volunteers are needed to supplement full-time forces.

For hundreds of Ontario municipalities, it makes fiscal and logical sense to rely on a combination of full-time professional firefighters, double hatters and volunteers to protect the community. It is the job of individual municipalities to decide how to deliver fire protection services as determined by local need and circumstance. One size does not fit all.

Financial impact

Municipalities pay for the cost of training new volunteer firefighters. Hiring double hatters allows municipalities to invest the cost of training new volunteers into other vital community services or infrastructure. The cost to replace all of Ontario's double hatters with new volunteers is staggering. It's simply not a reality for many Ontario municipalities that must manage their own budgets in the midst of ongoing, province-wide economic challenges.

The firefighters' union argues that the existence of double haters weakens collective bargaining. The reality is, double haters help protect small communities that could not possibly afford a full-time, salaried fire service. Double haters allow these communities to benefit from the expertise of full-time, professional firefighters on an on-call basis.

Fairness

It is not the job of a labour organization to dictate what its members can and cannot do during their free time. The union argues that double hatting should be banned because volunteer firefighting can be physically taxing. However, it is common for firefighters to have part time jobs that are physically taxing, such as construction and contracting work. The Union dictates that firefighters can do anything they want in their free time, except what they are trained to do.

Simply put, the firefighters' union is using its power against good people, for political reasons.