

# Accord ends hunger strike

## Firemen promised review of hours

By Tonny Chan and Anthony Flores

FIREMEN last night ended their hunger strike and began resuming normal duties.

Their three-day protest fast ended after the Civil Service Branch agreed to review within a year the feasibility of a 48-hour week instead of the present 60 hours.

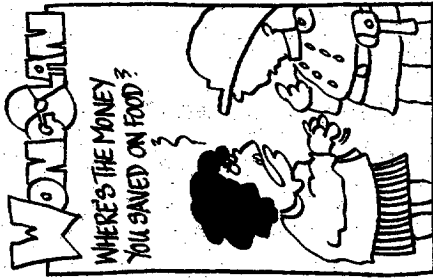
The breakthrough came as at least a fifth of Hong-kong's fire stations were out of service because of the number of firemen absent after reporting sick.

Emerging from two hours of negotiations last night, Deputy Secretary for Civil Service Wilfred Wong said the review would probably be discussed by the Standing Committee on Disciplined Services Salaries and Conditions of Services on April 11.

"If the standing committee does not make any decision on the 48-hour issue, the Government will set up a working group on June 1 to study the matter," Mr Wong said.

"We hope the working group will complete its study within one year and submit their recommendations to the standing committee for consideration and decision."

Fire Services Department Staff General Union chairman Tang Wing



### INSIDE:

Street poll reveals public support for a drop in hours: **Page 3**

hang said firemen were satisfied the Government was sincere.

News of the review was greeted with cheers and jubilation by more than 2,000 firemen waiting in Chater Garden last night.

They promised to resume eating and return to their stations as their health allowed.

Fire services are expected to be completely back to normal by 9 am today.

Mr Tang urged on-duty firemen who had fallen

sick to go back to work last night if they felt they could.

Mr Wong said the branch agreed with firemen that a 54-hour week should be introduced in the interim.

When asked why no agreement was possible before the hunger strike, Mr Wong said: "Negotiations require concessions from both sides."

Before last night's agreement, a senior Government official had warned that firemen may

be liable to disciplinary action if their action made them unfit for duty.

But Mr Tang said this issue had not been raised in the negotiations with Civil Service Branch officials.

Chief Fire Officer Peter Cheung said the hunger strike had put 12 of the territory's 56 fire stations out of service.

Most of the remaining stations were at limited strength, with only 60 out of the 100 fire engines in service.

Mr Cheung said the 60 fire engines had been re-deployed at strategic stations in each region.

It was only a matter of luck that there was no big fire during the hunger strike, he said.

The department would have been able to handle only three No 3 alarm fires at once, compared with nine normally.

At one stage 90 percent of Kai Tak Airport's firemen were absent. Specially trained senior fire officials filled in.

Mr Cheung said they were able to maintain only minimum safety requirements - manning four fire engines and the fireboat *Thunderbird* instead of the normal nine fire engines and boat.

A team of Royal Navy divers and Marine Department coxswains were also on full alert to operate the *Thunderbird*.

In all, 1,100 firemen sought medical treatment. All but 100 were granted sick leave.

At the height of the

protest, casualty wards throughout the territory were jammed with firemen.

More than 130 firemen complained that doctors at Queen Mary Hospital deliberately delayed treating them.

Some said they had to wait up to nine hours.

But a spokesman for the Hospital Services Department denied the allegation and said delays were caused by the sudden influx of patients.

HONG KONG STANDARD

29 March 1990