

HANSARD

1 APRIL 2009

CLEANERS' PAY RATES — GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS

Motion

DR M.D. NAHAN (Riverton) [4.58 pm]: Madam Acting Speaker — Just like the member for Morley, I had a visit in early December from Mr Dave Kelly, the head of the miscellaneous workers' union. He wrote to me and asked to have a meeting with me. Normally, I would tell him to go down to Menzies House, because I know that he is a political operative.

However, this time he said that he was going to bring with him a couple of people from my electorate of Riverton, so I said yes. I met him on 5 December, and he raised the issue of the pay problems with contract cleaners in government buildings. Clearly, the data he provided me was cause for concern; that is, they were among the lowest paid and the lowest income workers in the state.

Everyone would feel for those workers. When I was at university, I worked as a contract cleaner. It was hard work, with low and variable pay. That was 40 years ago. To be honest, I cannot remember much about it, and it did not last very long.

At that meeting, they raised some good points. I said that I would bring the matter to the attention of the Treasurer, which I did. However, before the Treasurer could possibly respond, "Terrance the Trailer" had gone into the electorate and was campaigning. That did not surprise me. It was clearly from the start a political campaign.

If the missos had wanted to solve the problem, they would have said to the government and to people in the electorate, "Here is the problem. How can we address it?" They did not do that. They ran a campaign for Mr Kelly.

The real issue here is that we have just gone through the biggest boom in Australia's history. Labour has been in short supply. People have been getting huge wage increases. Cleaners on mine sites have been earning \$80 000 to \$100 000 a year.

Mr P.B. Watson: What about the cleaners at Albany Senior High School? What are they getting?

Dr M.D. NAHAN: I think they are getting government wages, are they not? That is what members have told me. Okay. How did these people miss out? Their union was useless! This is a moral issue. These people have missed out, in the largest boom this state has ever had. These people have been left on low wages.

Why did the unions allow that to happen? It is because the unions did not spend their time doing what they are supposed to be doing: representing their members, particularly the low-income workers, by going to their bosses to get a wage increase for them. I heard earlier—I think it was from the member for Nollamara—that the employers knew that they needed to pay their workers higher wages. So why did their union not get those higher wages for them? Why?

Ms J.M. Freeman interjected.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: Some cleaners have been given large wage increases. The missos spent their time trying to get members into this place. They spent their time taking their members' money and running political campaigns to get Mr Kelly into this place. That is what happened. We have a moral issue here.

We have just gone through the biggest boom in the history of this state, yet people have been left on low incomes, and in itinerant work, because the people they relied upon to look after them did not look after them. They looked after themselves. They did not look after the workers.

Another issue is that the missos campaigned for the Labor Party at the last election. They said to their workers, "We are looking after you. If the Labor Party gets back into government, we will get you a wage increase." They said that, yet they knew very well that that was not going to happen, because there was no money in the budget for a wage increase—no money, no wage increase.

They were tricking the workers. They were misleading them. They were misleading the poorest people in the workforce. They were misleading their own members. Why were they misleading them? It was because they wanted their members to help them campaign for the Labor Party so that they could get into government themselves. That is a serious conflict of interest—serious.

What is the solution? It is a moral issue, as the member for Jandakot has said. I want to help these contract cleaners to get a wage increase. Therefore, my advice to them is that they ditch their union and take on a new union that will put its efforts not into getting into politics, and not into campaigning for the Labor Party, but into looking after its members. If these workers did that, they would be able to get higher wages, and we would not have to deal with this issue in this place. We would not have to use taxpayers' money to subsidise this work.

I actually asked the departments how much work they had put into this before the election, and they said that they had not done any work on this at all. When I asked them why, they said that no-one had told them that they had to put money into their budgets for this wage increase. We had all heard about this.

The union had been talking about it, and the Labor Government had put out two or three press releases on it, but there was no action. That is typical of the Labor Party. However, the union duped its members. It tricked them to get their votes, and it then left them in the lurch.

This is my solution: we should encourage the contract cleaners to take care of themselves and start a new union that will represent them and get a wage increase for them. Of course, that will be difficult now, because the boom has finished. It will be really tough for these people. They will be lucky to keep their jobs, and they will be very lucky to get a wage increase.

However, I urge them to remember what their union did to them. They are in this position because they made a tragic error—they allowed their union to take their money and their vote, and they were left in the lurch.