

Tuesday, 15 October 2019

Link between union-bashing bill and public health campaigns

The fight for public safety and to secure justice and billions of dollars' worth of compensation for asbestos victims would not have been won without a campaign of work stoppages, boycotts and protests.

In light of this history and with silicosis posing a growing threat to Australian workers, Asbestos victims have travelled to Parliament House to warn that the proposed Ensuring Integrity Bill would reduce the ability of unions to protect the public and working people.

The campaign to rid Australia of asbestos has been led by working people and their representatives, but the ability for unions to inspect workplaces and keep the public and their members safe would be severely limited under this bill.

Under the Ensuring Integrity Bill, a union official who visited a workplace without providing 24 hours notice would risk being disqualified from office and could face having their entire union shut down.

These new laws will give big business many more opportunities to prevent unions from organising to bring any wrongdoing to light by bogging them down in endless, costly litigation, limiting unions capacity to fight for justice for the next victims of workplace negligence.

This bill will make Australian workplaces and the public less safe and must be opposed.

Quotes attributable to Dr Chris Clarke:

“As a Respiratory Physician specialising in occupational lung disease, I have witnessed the resurgence of occupational lung diseases that were once confined to the history books.

“There are coal workers with pneumoconiosis and factory workers with silicosis. These diseases are completely preventable.

“The increase in self-regulation of safety, and the reduction or abolition of safety inspectors would appear to coincide with this rise in these occupational lung diseases. An employee who used their volunteer run health and safety committee to advocate for life saving reform could fall foul of this ill thought out Act.

“If the Government and cross bench pass the Ensuring Integrity Bill I fear that community volunteers and advocates within the union movement who fight for the right of everyone to come home safely from work would be hamstrung.

“I have seen the life changing work the union movement did in securing justice for my patients, the majority of whom were victims of diseases caused by workplace and environmental exposure to asbestos. I fear that the passing of this bill means the next generation suffering from diseases due to workplace negligence would be left to fight on their own or have their strongest advocates become criminals.”

Quotes attributable to AMWU National Secretary Paul Bastian:

“James Hardie tried to short-change sufferers of asbestos diseases by over \$4 billion. Without our campaign of work stoppages, boycotts and protests, we would not have achieved justice for the victims of these horrific diseases. Under current workplace laws, these activities are illegal.

“If Scott Morrison’s union busting bill is passed, the delegates, organisers and officials that campaigned for justice for sufferers of asbestos-diseases could be excluded from the leadership of our union and our union could be deregistered.

“If these laws had existed at the time, there’s a real chance James Hardie could have successfully used them to tie up our union and our officials in costly and time-consuming legal actions in an attempt to defeat us. That would have affected not only our union, but the many Australians suffering from asbestos diseases.

“We can’t allow the next James Hardie to use the new powers in these laws to prevent victims from achieving justice.”

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O’Neil:

“History tells us that threats to workers and the public’s health like asbestos only get tackled when workers stand together in their unions and demand change. If this Bill had been law during the fight to ban asbestos and hold James Hardy to account we would have seen unions shut down for actions to ensure public and worker safety.

“No worker should be afraid to stand up and say they feel unsafe, or that they are worried about a co-worker or the public. This Scott Morrison union busting bill would mean that workers simply trying to protect themselves and the community could face their entire union being shut down.

“Four people every week die at work, thousands die every year from workplace-related illnesses. We need stronger protections for workers and the public, not a bill which give employers unprecedented power. Unions play an important role in standing up against the abuse of corporate power.

“There is no ensuring integrity bill for the companies who continue to breach the ban on importing asbestos. Directors of companies who routinely put workers lives at risk are not disqualified. This union busting bill is about silencing working people and making workers and the public less safe. It must be stopped.”

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