

Safety and jobs too important for industrial games

Two weeks ago the construction union called on members to march on Parliament House today to end worksite deaths.

But two days ago, safety took a back seat as the CFMEU instead took aim at Senator Nick Xenophon. The protest was no longer about safety, but was now about building laws and union jobs. On both counts, the union's own behaviour shows these are empty words.

The union argued more powers for health and safety representatives would "stop deaths on SA building sites". Yet when the State's safety regulator, SafeWork SA, reviewed these laws in November, the construction union didn't take the time to explain what changes were needed, or why. Its rival, the Australian Workers Union, thought it important enough to claim that the laws were "restrictive" and do "not provide for efficient and practical outcomes", with no details.

Health and safety representatives connect all parties on busy construction sites with many risks. The South Australian laws allow them to seek help from people on the worksite, those involved in managing the business or an approved consultant. In contrast, the national template allows anyone to be called upon. In other states, this power has been abused by using it as a back door for union officials whose credentials to enter worksites have been revoked.

The additional reach for health and safety representatives isn't a concern if safety is the sole issue and the laws are treated with respect.

CFMEU officials this week refused to rule out breaking the law in protest against changes to building laws. The State branch promised "Armageddon" in response to a company implementing a legally-binding Court order. And Courts have repeatedly noted the union's refusal to follow the law as they have blown an estimated \$2 million of its members' fees on fines and legal costs. For those counting, that's equivalent to the annual fees paid by more than 2600 members.

If safety was the most important value at the heart of the union it would stand by Master Builders SA's support of SafeWork SA.

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SafeWork SA representatives do not wield power to shut down sites based on a popularity contest or through worksite politicking. Inspectors receive focused training in hazard management, inspection procedures, and investigative techniques, applying them in the specialized field that is the building and construction industry. And, with reforms championed by Deputy Premier John Rau, SafeWork SA now focuses on proactively helping businesses improve their performance without fear of repercussions. SafeWork SA is the key to protecting workers, and Master Builders SA supports its independence.

Reducing the transition period for new building laws from two years to nine months will underwrite the building jobs South Australia needs. Building companies want the changes as they will create a level playing field for all players when it comes to bidding for Commonwealth projects. The changes will protect smaller businesses from union threats and intimidation sooner. And it will protect taxpayers sooner by prohibiting union claims that effectively boost the cost of schools, hospitals and roads by up to 30 per cent.

More importantly, it will provide better protection for workers and businesses that reject the union's ongoing disregard for the law. We can again focus on building safely, working closely with the safety experts at SafeWork SA to get real outcomes.

Every person in the industry must take safety seriously. It is too important for industrial games.

South Australia needs more than that, and deserves better than that.

Ian Markos

Chief Executive Officer, Master Builders SA