

Letter from an Australian Telstra worker on the death of a 10-year-old boy

13 March 2002

The following letter was written in response to the article: Australian government cost cutting results in death of 10-year-old boy.

My experiences in the field as a Telstra technical specialist leads me to wholly concur with your February 25 article on the tragic death of Sam Boulding. Your statement that responsibility for this child's unnecessary death is the result of the cost-cutting and staff cuts by Telstra directed by successive federal governments, both Liberal and Labor, is right on mark.

Sam Boulding died during a severe asthma attack because his mother's telephone service had been down for 10 days and she could not call for an ambulance and medical assistance. Telstra could not reconnect the phone because there was a backlog of faults. This situation was not accidental but had been systematically created over the last decade and a half by Telstra's aggressive elimination of thousands of technical field workforce jobs. These jobs were destroyed not because they were redundant but to reduce operating costs, push up profits and more recently to boost share values in preparation for full privatisation. During this 15-year period Telstra cut its workforce from 93,000 to 45,000.

The company is presently completing its plan, begun in March 2000, to eliminate 10,000 jobs. This is on top of 2,500 jobs recently axed from its Network Design and Construction division. Telstra has also announced that it intends to cut \$500 million from capital expenditure this year, meaning more jobs are on the line.

In my district, prior to the job cuts, we serviced 120,000 customers with a field staff of over 400. Today, we service over 200,000 customers with just 88 staff. Our geographic district has been extended so that we cover an area at least double the previous size. As more and more staff are pushed out the door, those left behind are required to fill the gaps. It is now common for staff to travel over 800 kilometres in a week to carry out work. We are forced to become multi-skilled, take on enormous

workloads and are coerced into working large amounts of overtime.

It is now a daily occurrence for staff to be asked to work back far into the night and early hours of the morning. With 88 field technicians we can process 352 Tickets of Work (TOW), that is, faults and installations, daily. But most days the TOW count is well over this number, the excess managed by staff working overtime.

At least six times in the last 12 months the TOW count has been closer to 800, forcing management to use field technicians from other districts. The cost of shipping in outside staff is extremely expensive so local staff are subjected to constant pressure by management to work as much overtime as possible, give up rostered days off and work seven days a week. This, of course, leads to fatigue and the pace can't be maintained, ensuring that there are more delays. Also, when unusual problems occur in a number of areas at the same time, it becomes impossible for one area to supplement the other and the "lean" system falls into chaos.

Recently, during a wet weather period, an assistant manager chastised a team leader (a team consists of 16 staff), claiming that his team was not pulling its weight and alleging that it had worked less extra hours than other teams in the district. The team leader later told me that his men had been working extra long hours clearing faults caused by bushfires and were totally worn out.

Cutbacks in cable maintenance staff over the years now means that many cables are in disrepair. (I believe that cabling problems probably caused of the breakdown in phone services to the Boulding household). In bad weather cabling faults lead to even more problems and make it impossible for technicians to keep up.

During the last two months extreme weather along the east coast of Australia caused widespread bush fires, followed by heavy rains and flooding. Water seeped into the cable network generating two to three times the normal number of daily faults and it became impossible to

attend to the complaints within the Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) time.

If Telstra fails to fix a given fault within the CSG time limit, usually three days, it is forced by government regulation to pay compensation to the customer. To avoid paying massive compensation and to cover up the extended delays, Telstra applied for, and was granted, a CSG exemption, known as a Mass Service Disruption (MSD). The exemption not only saved Telstra thousands of dollars in payouts, but more importantly legitimised delays in restoring services.

Bush fires caused major disruption to phone services in one rural area on the outskirts of Sydney in New South Wales. Delays restoring services were really excessive, causing widespread anger. At a team brief I attended prior to being sent to the area the supervisor warned us that residents were furious and that some Telstra employees had been verbally abused and threatened. We were instructed to avoid contact with the locals as much as possible and not to stop at shops or gas stations where they might congregate.

What is occurring in my district, however, is not the exception but the rule.

In February the Australian Communications Authority (ACA) revealed that Telstra was forced to pay more than \$13 million in compensation to customers following an increase in claims over late repairs and connections in the last financial year. Compensation claims for late connections rose by 438 percent and late repair claims rose by 134 percent in this period. The ACA's latest "Consumer Satisfaction Report", issued in January this year, found that 40 percent of householders surveyed were dissatisfied with the time taken to repair telephone faults.

Sam Boulding's death forced Telstra into immediate damage control with the company announcing that it would conduct an internal inquiry. From past experience this will be a cover-up and will see Telstra blame some poor unfortunate subordinate. In fact, we have already been given specific instructions from upper management not to discuss the Boulding issue with customers or fellow workers.

The communication unions are pointing the finger at Telstra. A press release by the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) NSW branch on February 15 said: "Telstra's program of staff reductions, budget cuts and outsourcing is proving disastrous for people who rely on their telephones. Now management appear to have the very tragic death of 10-year-old Sam Boulding on their conscience."

While the accusation is well founded, Telstra could not have sacked so many people without the active assistance of the unions, which have worked to prevent any serious struggle to save jobs.

In July 1996 when Telstra announced its intention to shed a further 24,000 jobs, CEPU issued a bulletin stating: "Telstra reduced staff from 93,000 to 63,000 between 1991 and 1995 through a cooperative framework involving industrial agreements designed to avoid conflict."

Two days later at a mass meeting to discuss these cuts—the last meeting called by the union over jobs—CEPU officials steered members into demands for securing the current "voluntary" redundancy agreements. These agreements were designed to assist Telstra shed jobs while "avoiding conflict".

The unions claimed the real aim of Telstra was to initiate "forced" redundancies and said that the only course of action was to defend the "voluntary" agreements in the courts. When members called for industrial action to defend jobs, union leaders insisted that real job security lay in a good redundancy package.

Sam Boulding's death will not produce any change in the unions' position. A few days ago Telstra called in the unions to tell them that they are planning a major overhaul of the company's current industrial relations processes in order to increase its ability to slash jobs and cut operating expenditure. In response, the union issued a bulletin that brought back memories of the 1996 mass meeting. The bulletin was entitled: "CEPU ready once more to defend Telstra redundancy agreement."

Telstra management and the unions have done everything possible to divide Telstra workers and restrict access to information on what is happening with jobs and conditions in various areas. An open discussion by Telstra workers on this issue is urgently needed or more lives will be tragically lost.

NA



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