

Australian cleaners denied penalty rates by trade union for more than a decade

Our reporters
17 June 2015

Two Sydney casual workers for Cleanevent, one of Australia's biggest cleaning contractors, were interviewed by the WSWs last week. They revealed that they had been stripped of penalty wage rates as a result of Australian Workers Union (AWU)-negotiated agreements since 2002, when they began working for the company.

They also spoke of repeatedly complaining to the union about their sub-standard pay and conditions, only to be brushed aside. The interviews shed light on the reality behind the current attempts of the Abbott government to exploit the AWU's deals with Cleanevent and other companies for its own political purposes.

Successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, with the assistance of the trade union bureaucracy, have already dismantled penalty rates for working on weekends, public holidays and after-hours for some of the country's lowest-paid workers.

The interviews confirm that the AWU imposed large wage cuts on about 4,000 casual cleaners nationally in return for Cleanevent secretly enrolling its employees in the union and paying for their union dues. The workers "recruited" in this sham process did not even know they were union members.

Under a secret Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by the company and the union in 2010, casual cleaners were paid at little as \$16.64 an hour for working on any day of the week, and at any time of the day, instead of rates of up to \$50.17 an hour under the relevant industrial award.

The document was signed by the AWU national secretary at the time, Paul Howes, a key Labor Party powerbroker. Behind the backs of workers, the MOU kept in place, for an extra three years, a 2006 national three-year "enterprise bargaining agreement" signed

between Cleanevent Australia and the AWU, based on the flat wage rate regime.

Documents presented last week to a royal commission set up by the Abbott government, supposedly to investigate "union corruption," also showed that Bill Shorten, the current Labor Party leader, signed a 2004 agreement with Cleanevent based on the same flat-rate regime.

As well as extra funds, falsely inflated union membership statistics gave the AWU bureaucracy bigger voting blocks in union congresses and the Labor Party, providing a power base for figures such as Shorten and Howes.

In this interview, the cleaners have been given pseudonyms, in order to protect them from potential victimisation by the company and the AWU.

Rebecca, who has been working for Cleanevent for more than 12 years, said: "We never got penalty rates! It was only \$16 an hour to start with in 2002. And we have only had a \$5 rise in all that time!"

The casual cleaner laughed at Treasurer Joe Hockey's recent assertion that workers needed to find better-paying jobs in order to be able to afford to buy a house in Sydney. "On Christmas or any day, it made no difference. It was all the same money. It only changed a couple of years ago, to pay a little more on weekends—\$24 not \$21."

Rebecca said she had worked "long hours" at some of Sydney's premiere events and venues, such as the Royal Easter Show, the Convention Centre and Rosehill Racecourse, just to earn enough to live on. "I would be very interested to know how much money Cleanevent made on these events," she commented.

"We're on an on-call basis. We have to be on standby. Sometimes we get called in with not much notice. It can be any day, any time. They can ring you

at 11 in the morning, and say ‘can you come into the city and work?’ We have to be there in half an hour, or an hour. They couldn’t do it without us. But we have to work long hours just to ‘make it’.”

Rebecca was scathing about the role of the AWU. “We never got any papers for the union. We filled in forms for our tax file numbers, etc., and that’s it. No union, nothing. They just took money out of my wages and it went to the union office. Then they took me off the union, and again did not tell me. Last year, when I complained to the union about something, they turned around and said ‘You’re not a member anymore’.”

If workers made any complaints about their conditions, Cleanevent would stop offering them any work. “I complained once, and they ‘benched’ me for more than a month,” Rebecca explained. “They didn’t give me work anymore. If you say anything, they bench you!”

“They just say, ‘We’ve got enough people.’ I said, ‘You wanted us every day, and now you don’t want us. How come? They just said, when we have something we’ll call you.’

“We should ask for all the money they owe us, and they should start paying us the proper wage—from now on—instead of cheating us. I want to ask the union: ‘How come you agreed to all of this?’

“They claim that this was just the Victorian AWU branch, but I’ve got my doubts. They all work together in the union. Of course, they knew about it.”

Joan, who also started with Cleanevent in 2002, said: “For 12 years, we never had penalty rates, or holiday rates. I think it stinks. You should have penalty rates for overtime, night-shift and public holidays especially.

“I’ve been dealing with the union for quite a few years. I always wondered why I could never get anywhere—why it was always pushed under the carpet... Now that we know what has been going down, I understand why the union was getting nowhere.

“One of the clauses [in the agreement] stated that they could not bring any dispute to light. This is why all our complaints over the past 10 years, about why we weren’t paid penalty rates, have gone nowhere. That’s why we had bosses laughing at us, saying, ‘it’s because of the union, it’s under the EBA’.”

Joan spoke about some of the conditions that the casual workers faced. “There’s a lack of staff, lack of equipment, lack of communications. We’re under the

pump at major events. You’ve got two seconds to do everything. So you are frazzled. Nerves are frayed to start with. At times, management screams and yells at you. ‘Why isn’t this done? Get a move on! Stuff like that’.”

Joan explained why the Cleanevent workers had to work long shifts. “We have to make hours to get good money. We have to work 10 or 12 hours to make it worthwhile.” She concluded: “The company and the union, they all made us workers suffer, with no conscience.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact