

# NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard

## CLEANING CONTRACTS

**Mr PETER DRAPER** (Tamworth) [5.59 p.m.]: I draw the House's attention to the plight of those responsible for keeping our schools, police stations, courthouses, government buildings and, indeed, the environment of our electorate offices clean, tidy, hygienic, amenable, safe and pleasant places in which to work. I refer to the 7,000 cleaners in New South Wales who rely upon extended Government contracts to meet mortgage payments, educate children and put food on the table. I can provide many examples of honest, hardworking people in my electorate of Tamworth who are dedicated, proud employees of Government-contracted cleaning services. The fellow contracted to clean my electorate office is a father of four who works hard to support his family. He can little afford to lose a day's work, let alone his job, but he was one of 80 cleaners from across the New England north-west who took strike action and rallied in Tamworth recently in protest of the proposal of the Department of Commerce to renegotiate government cleaning contracts and introduce, in October next year, a new system that will not only reduce cleaners' time to provide for only a basic standard of cleaning but also poses a huge threat to job security.

The group of cleaners converged on my office to enlist my support and urge me to communicate a strong message to the Government, particularly Premier Bob Carr. That message was "Shame, Carr, shame!" The cleaners feel that the Premier betrayed them on a promise that changes to Government contracts made after the State privatised cleaning contracts in 1993 would not threaten job security. Under the current system cleaners have a guarantee that they will work for whoever wins the contract. But with the Government now proposing to drop this provision in the new system, cleaners feel extremely vulnerable. Christine Hughes, for example, is an award-winning cleaner at Tamworth's Oxley Vale Public School. She has cleaned the school for 23 years and loves her job, but she now has grave concerns for her future and that of a 62-year-old co-worker. Christine said:

We seem to rush all the time to cover all the cleaning we are required to do. We usually don't get any thanks for what we do, nor do we expect it. All we would like is to be able to keep working at our school without any more cuts to our hours. We don't care if we never get another pay rise, we just want our jobs.

Christine's attitude typifies that of cleaners generally. They are a humble group, happy just to be working, but they are at breaking point. The cleaners are represented by the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, and it is the first time in 11 years they have taken strike action. Is the department aware that it is already physically impossible for cleaners to achieve a reasonable standard of cleaning with the existing hours and staff numbers, and that additional functions under occupational health and safety regulations compound pressures on their time? The average age of cleaners in New South Wales is 48, and those on the ground tell me that workplace injury is a huge issue.

Is the department aware that incoming contractors could favour younger cleaners and

cleaners who have never been injured? I know that a study is currently being undertaken by the New South Wales WorkCover Authority to assess the repetitive manual tasks of cleaners. The study came about, in part, in response to a recommendation arising from the 2002 New South Wales Workplace Safety Summit. The recommendation highlighted that significant causes of musculoskeletal and occupational overuse injuries in cleaners were "high expectations in limited time frames and product savings". It strikes me as being somewhat hypocritical of Government to have one department seeking to reduce cleaning hours another department acknowledging that high expectations in a limited time are linked to an injured cleaning work force. In my view it is incumbent on the Department of Commerce to apply the results of this study in any renegotiation of contracts.

In a position paper on the renegotiation of contracts the department stated it did not believe the current contract structure for cleaning gives quality outcomes at the best value for Government agencies. I ask how the department expects to achieve quality outcomes from a cleaning service when its cleaning hours are to be cut back to "minimum mandatory services", such as toilet cleaning, vacuuming and emptying bins. The *Australian* newspaper reported that Department of Commerce bureaucrats suggested that if school principals elected for the "basic clean", parents could chip in to clean the windows, playgrounds and classrooms. Does the department honestly expect optional services to be picked up by parents, parents and citizens association members, and even teachers, whose recent wage case highlighted their workload and who, in small rural schools, are already struggling with a lack of peer and administration support? I ask the Government to give cleaners what they want: an offer of employment from all new incoming contractors, as occurred under the last two contracts; a guarantee to maintain their hours of work and disallow subcontracting; a guarantee that worksites will be maintained in the contract; and a guarantee that contracts will be let at a reasonable size to ensure companies put proper systems in place.

I have sought the assistance of the Hon. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans in the other place in asking questions of the Minister for Commerce on behalf of the cleaners in New South Wales. I ask that those questions be taken seriously, in light of the concerns expressed by the many longstanding members of the cleaning profession. If we want an adequate level of service, we need to ensure that the people who perform those services are given some sort of reassurance that the restructure will not pose a threat to their jobs and that their work hours will not be reduced.

**Private members' statements noted.**

*[Mr Acting-Speaker (Mr Paul Lynch) left the chair at 6.05 p.m. The House resumed at 7.30 p.m.]*