

ALCOA — MENTAL HEALTH

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [6.24 pm]: It had been my intention today to table a petition in this place signed by 493 people that addresses a very, very serious topic. When I collected the petition for presentation a couple of days ago and spoke to the people who had collected all these signatures, I was so concerned about the gravity of the issues that have been raised that I made the decision that it was not appropriate to present this matter as a petition and that instead, such is my concern about the need for urgency of action, I would approach the Minister for Commerce directly and ask him to take personal charge of conducting some sort of investigation.

Very quickly, my remarks ought to be placed in the context of this petition. I think that when I read the substance of the petition, honourable members will know exactly why I have made the decision that I have. The petition is headed “Alcoa—Act on Mental Health!” and it reads —

To the Honourable the President and Members of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled. We the undersigned work at Alcoa and have grave concerns for our mental health and wellbeing due to the company’s confrontational and aggressive management style.

Many employees have already been pushed to breaking point yet management is refusing to acknowledge our serious concerns regarding this entrenched and systemic bullying, harassment and intimidation.

We respectfully request that members of the Legislative Council take up our concerns with the Honourable Minister for Commerce and request he directs Worksafe to conduct a comprehensive inquiry into Alcoa’s poor approach to employee mental health.

As I say, that request for action has been signed by nearly 500 people expressing their concerns. I have sat down with a group of employee representatives to talk this through, and I am deeply concerned about the accounts that have been given to me. I am not going to identify any individuals in making these remarks, because obviously people have their privacy to protect, and it is very appropriate to do that. I am, however, quite distressed by the report of one particular individual. When he was finally given a specialist psychiatric appointment locally in the south west, he heard the psychiatrist saying, “Oh, another Alcoa employee.” That tells me that this problem has been recognised outside the workplace by people who are trying to deliver professional services to help these people.

From the accounts that have been given to me, what we seem to have here is a kind of systemic misuse of management prerogative. It seems that older workers are being treated differently from younger workers. People who have been working for Alcoa for many decades have suddenly found that the way they are being treated has changed. Given that Alcoa employees are entitled to 10 sick days under their agreement, people have noticed that as soon as they rack up five sick days they are asked to give an account of it to management. I should make it clear that I am talking about the Pinjarra refinery site; I am not suggesting, nor has it been suggested to me, that this problem is endemic at other Alcoa sites. People who take more than half their sick days feel that they are being asked to account for that. People who are seconds late clocking in for work are being reported for contraventions. People with spotless employment records and no previous recorded offences are being given first and final warnings—even people with clean records. Having heard specific accounts, I certainly agree with the observation of the workers that frequently these offences are trivial, and frequently they are false, because when an employee goes into the details of the offence they have committed, they find that the offence was on a date when they were not even on shift at the refinery.

Given the asbestos scare at Alcoa recently and all the issues around that, it is the observation of workers—certainly this was borne out anecdotally—that people who have been outspoken about that issue and others have also been targeted.

I understand that there has been an increase in suicides amongst Alcoa Pinjarra workers and I understand there have been numerous attempted suicides, and that has been reported by people providing the employee assistance program. I do not think that Alcoa has not tried to respond to this. I believe it has tried to respond to it. Certainly, over the years, I have found that Alcoa is genuinely responsive to these kinds of issues when they are brought up by the local workforce. I understand that mental health first aid courses have been delivered at the Alcoa worksite in Pinjarra, but I think that the problem is—this is what I intend to sit down and talk about with the Minister for Commerce, who has carriage of WorkSafe referrals—that it can deliver those training courses, but if it has a systemic problem with the treatment of employees, it needs a cultural change that cannot necessarily be driven by people who have workplace training. As I understand it, those mental health first aid training courses—I am sure that the Minister for Mental Health knows a lot about this—can certainly improve the

awareness of mental illness in the workplace and they can certainly deliver to individual employees more resources to help workmates so that they can perhaps, over a period, make an alteration to that culture. But I am not sure that the purpose of those courses was ever to address a systemic, cultural problem within a workplace, and I am not sure that they can do that. Workers are beginning to question their own judgement about these things. Management is saying, “You’ve done the training; it should be okay now”, yet the workers are finding that they are not dealing with things in a more confident way. It is a very upsetting situation, because the conflicts are increasing. People are being asked to account for situations. They are feeling undermined at work. They are being asked to account for their home life. They are being asked to account for their personal practices with their diets and the consumption of alcohol, when in fact the cause of the problem, as has been presented to me, is that basic undermining of confidence at work. I think that is very serious.

Hon Peter Collier: Have you spoken to Alcoa about these concerns?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: It has been raised with Alcoa, yes.

Hon Peter Collier: You have, have you?

Hon SALLY TALBOT: It has been raised with Alcoa. As I say, I have nearly 500 signatures on a request for action. That is what I have brought to the house tonight to talk about. That is what I will raise directly with the Minister for Commerce. I have not had that conversation with the minister yet. I intend to have it hopefully within the next 24 hours, depending on the minister’s availability.

I will leave my remarks at that point. I think we have a very serious situation here. Alcoa is a company that is covered by at least one state agreement, and I think it is incumbent on the government to take this matter extremely seriously.

The PRESIDENT: Member, I take it that you have a petition that conforms to our standing orders.

Hon Sally Talbot: No, I am not tabling it as a petition.

The PRESIDENT: So you are not tabling it to be considered in the normal course of events?

Hon Sally Talbot: No; that is right.

House adjourned at 6.34 pm
