

We must unite to fight union thuggery

PETER ANDERSON THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 05, 2012 12:00AM



Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union members form a blockade at Grocon's Myer Emporium project in the Melbourne CBD last weekend. Picture: Stuart McEvoy Source: The Australian

RARELY are political or industrial matters black and white, which explains why politicians don't always give straight answers. Recent industrial action by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union against builder Grocon is the exception that proves the rule.

It's right for Grocon to stand up for its right to appoint safety officers; after all, politicians made laws saying this company is responsible for anything and everything that happens on site.

It's wrong for the union to impose its will against this builder, the industry and the economy. It is especially wrong to use intimidation and threat to defy orders of courts that no other citizen has the right to ignore.

When right and wrong hit you in the face, the least we should expect is our leaders to stand up for what is right.

I know there are plenty of members and officials from other unions dismayed by the CFMEU and its indifference to the rights of others and the rule of law. That's because most of us, whether in unions, business or politics, know right from wrong.

Translating dismay into action is what real leadership is about.

Cleaning up the construction industry from thuggery and intimidation is not just a job for the courts, builders or conservative governments.

The labour movement, both political and industrial wings, has a critical role to play. The key is for all

arms of civil society to denounce the conduct and culture seen on Melbourne streets. It is the same culture that the Cole royal commission a decade ago said had to be rooted out, and that former regulators such as John Lloyd of the now-abolished Australian Building and Construction Commission warned still existed below the surface.

Wouldn't it be great if Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott, ACTU president Ged Kearney and business and community leaders like myself sent a joint message around the country and into Asia that every force of Australian civil society has locked in together and drawn a line against this conduct infecting our economy and authority of courts and police forces?

What stops this from happening is politics. Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu, understandably concerned at the reputation of his Supreme Court and state economy, wrote to the Prime Minister last Thursday.

Instead of getting support, Wayne Swan came out and gave him a political tirade.

The moment for leadership was lost. Politics clouded judgment.

It has been like that for a few months. Good Labor people privately tell me the Cole royal commission was on the right track in coming down hard on the construction unions and complicit companies.

Yet the same good Labor people voted down the regulator the Cole royal commission set up. A mistake was made, but politics won't allow mistakes to be acknowledged or go unpunished. We're now the poorer for it.

The real risk in this CFMEU-Grocon dispute is that once the protest disappears off the streets the public will think all is right. Deeper thought forces us to ask whether underlying cultures that spawn this conduct still exist and, if so, what can be done about it. Many inquiries into politics, the media, the corporate sector and the union movement have shown that rotten cultures are usually the cause of wrongdoing.

Rarely are these matters one-offs. In the case of the construction industry, the Cole royal commission, and the earlier inquiries of the 1980s and 90s by Labor and conservative governments suggest what happened in the streets of Melbourne was not a single moment of stupidity.

Like the rest of us, I try to live firmly on the right side of the law, respecting our institutions and expecting justice from the courts. None of that prevents me from having my opinion, supporting causes I feel strongly about, voting as I want, looking out for liberty and human rights and trying to change what I reckon is wrong. That's how we bring up our children, and is the difference between anarchy and order.

Too many of us have worked too hard over many generations to allow our economy or community to be tarnished by people who think they can get their way by muscle and thuggery.

In recent months the public has pushed our politicians to reach some agreement on important things such as refugee screening and a National Disability Insurance Scheme. We should do exactly the same with thuggery in the construction industry.

Our most powerful weapon is a united and uncompromising joint view from our parliament and civil society. Why is that too much to ask?

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