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Spying operation at Victorian desal project is a breach of workers' rights and betrayal of trust

A secret operation to spy on workers at Victoria's desalination plant construction project is unethical business behaviour and an unacceptable breach of workers' rights, say unions.

The ACTU said the covert operation spying on workers was an invasion of privacy and a breach of trust of the highest order.

The spying operation was even more outrageous given the impeccable industrial relations record at the project, said ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence.

"Revelations today that contractor Thiess Degremont hired a company run by someone with a long history of anti-union activities to spy on workers at the Wonthaggi desalination project are highly disturbing," Mr Lawrence said.

"This is a massive breach of trust of the employment relationship and under no circumstances can it be tolerated or justified.

"No worker should expect to be spied upon by people paid to pose as work colleagues and secretly gather information.

"The employment of Bruce Townsend – who has a criminal record for receiving stolen goods and is a known agent provocateur – was an appalling error of judgment by Thiess.

"This project has until now been a model for harmonious industrial relations. It has an excellent record of no days lost to industrial action and is approaching completion on time and on budget.

"It has been a great example of what can be achieved through a co-operative approach between management and unions, but that has now all been undone by these actions by the company.

"No-one could blame the workers on the project for feeling betrayed today.

"Public statements by the company's chief executive would suggest that senior managers were not aware of his hiring, but this is hardly an excuse as it reveals a terrible culture within the company.

"Shareholders of Thiess' parent company, Leighton Holdings, would be fully entitled to ask why hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent in this way."

Mr Lawrence said Thiess must conduct a full, open and independent investigation into this matter.

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