

Wednesday, 22 October 2014

James Hardie trying to shirk responsibility for the deaths of asbestos victims

Unions have been left with little confidence James Hardie will honour its responsibility to compensate asbestos victims following a meeting with the company this week.

ACTU Secretary Dave Oliver met senior management on Monday to discuss concerns about a shortfall in the Asbestos Injuries Compensation Fund set up to pay out claims to asbestos sufferers.

Mr Oliver said James Hardie management is seeking to rely on the draw down facility in the fund that was agreed to by previous state and federal governments to cover shortfalls in the fund.

“James Hardie needs to recognise that the assumptions used to set up the compensation fund may no longer be adequate – the sad reality is that more people are dying and at a much younger age than was predicted,” Mr Oliver said.

“Tax payers should not be forced to foot the bill. I am deeply disappointed that James Hardie’s management were rigid and not prepared to be flexible.

“The fact of the matter is James Hardie has a moral obligation to compensate the victims of asbestos-related disease and cannot transfer that responsibility.”

Unions are calling on James Hardie to resolve the fund shortfall to ensure asbestos victims receive lump sum payments - not instalments.

Mr Oliver said comments by James Hardie’s senior staff about this issue were insulting and dismissive of asbestos victims who deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

“James Hardie made it quite clear that they believe paying compensation to asbestos sufferers in instalments is an appropriate solution to the shortfall, with a representative stating people want an upfront payment because they “want a trip to Vegas”.

“For James Hardie to trivialize the needless deaths of thousands of Australians with such a comment is disgraceful.”

Mr Oliver said the average mesothelioma victim dies within 155 days of diagnosis.

“Asbestos victims do not die by instalments and should not be paid in instalments.”

Mr Oliver said both the Commonwealth and NSW Governments have also cast doubt over their intention to support use of the compensation fund’s loan draw down facility.

“Dying asbestos victims don’t have the luxury of time so if James Hardie shirks its responsibility to compensate victims then the government must be prepared to step in.

“I will be meeting the NSW Government to discuss the issue further however I am deeply disappointed to have received no response from the Prime Minister Tony Abbott on this matter.”

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