

Murray Watt seeks urgent explanation for CFMEU organiser's reprieve

By EWIN HANNAN

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Workplace Relations Minister Murray Watt has sought an urgent explanation from CFMEU administrator Mark Irving about [why he has kept employing a senior union organiser charged with threats to kill a labour hire company owner.](#)

National employers and the [opposition demanded Indigenous organiser Joel Shackleton be stood down](#), declaring Mr Irving's decision to keep him working for the union sent mixed signals about the government's promise to clean up the construction industry.

Senator Watt told The Australian on Thursday he had asked his office to seek an "urgent briefing" from Mr Irving about why Mr Shackleton had been kept on after being initially suspended on full pay when he was charged by Victoria Police last month.

The Fair Work Commission subsequently refused to extend Mr Shackleton's right of entry permit, citing the serious charges that were laid after he was caught on video telling the labour hire firm owner "I'll f..king take your soul and I'll rip your f..king head off".

Given Mr Irving initially suspended Mr Shackleton after he was charged, it is understood the government is seeking an explanation as to why the suspension was lifted and he was given an office job in the CFMEU's Victorian branch ahead of the

charges being heard in court on November 22. Mr Shackleton intends to plead not guilty to the charges.

Master Builders chief executive Denita Wawn said the government assured the public that a CFMEU administration would see the worst elements of the union cleaned out and restored to a lawful union.

“However, the feedback on the ground across the country suggests the actions taken so far regarding CFMEU personnel are sending mixed signals. We recognise the administrator has a difficult job and it is still early days to change the culture, but the industry needs clarity and consistency,” she said.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Andrew McKellar said the decision to keep Mr Shackleton employed was alarming and he should be stood down, given he faced serious criminal charges.

“In view of the actions that have been appropriately taken against a range of other officials in the union, honestly it’s puzzling and it raises concerns,” he said. “At a minimum, I would have thought he should have been stood aside.”

Senator Watt does not intend to ask Mr Irving to stand down Mr Shackleton, saying “matters of employment within the union are a matter for the administrator”.

He said the government condemned workplace violence and thuggery in any form and was “committed to cleaning up the construction sector and getting rid of the criminality and violence that has been embedded within it for years”.

During Senate question time, Nationals Senate leader Bridget McKenzie asked government Senate leader Penny Wong whether the government would intervene and instruct Mr Irving to terminate Mr Shackleton’s employment.

Senator Wong said she shared Senator McKenzie’s reaction to Mr Shackleton’s reported comments, saying thuggery and violence had no place in workplaces and on building sites.

She said Mr Irving had removed more than 12 full-time CFMEU officials as part of the scheme of administration, as well as hundreds of office bearers, and his decision in

relation to Mr Shackleton was a matter for him.

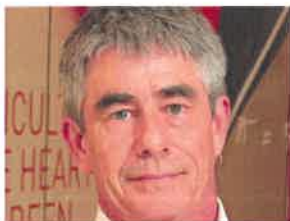
Opposition employment spokesman Michaelia Cash said the government needed to intervene and get Mr Shackleton suspended. “CFMEU officials charged with making death threats should not be employed by this organisation,” she said.

“If the Albanese government is serious about cleaning up the CFMEU, they will ensure this individual is stood down. Unfortunately, Mr Albanese is too weak to do so.”

The political stoush came as Victorian building unions put on hold their threats of a 72-hour strike and more protest rallies after hearing 700 employers had signed or committed to the Victorian CFMEU’s 21 per cent pattern deal.

The state building unions said the “unprecedented sign-up” meant a threatened 72-hour strike and a further rally would not go ahead. However, they said the unions “remain resolute that if there is a co-ordinated campaign to undermine the industry standards, all options remain open to ensure construction workers are signed up to the world-leading conditions of the CFMEU EBA”.

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