



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

Motions

17 May 2018

SCHOOL CLEANERS CONTRACT

Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) (12:44):

That this House:

- (1) Notes that the mother of the member for Wallsend was a school cleaner of 24 years service.
- (2) Notes that the Government intends to roll back the conditions of school cleaners in New South Wales.
- (3) Notes cleaners will be forced to reapply for their jobs at the end of every contract, which will see them lose their accrued sick and recreational leave as well as jeopardise their job security.
- (4) Urges the Premier to take urgent steps to protect school cleaners' jobs and conditions.

Last year thousands of cleaners were left wondering if they would be thrown out of work when the Government announced plans to make cleaners reapply for their jobs at the end of its contract this coming July. The previous arrangements have been in place since 1994, enabling cleaners to work, raise their kids and plan their lives with the knowledge that they had work security. They did not have to worry that when the Government picked a new contractor, they would lose their job security, their entitlements and potentially, their livelihoods. It was a worrying time for many in the industry. A cleaner at a local school told me:

I was terrified that I would lose my job and be out on the street...We are already struggling with the amount of work we need to do and the hours we have to do it in. A cut to our staffing numbers or our working hours would just make it untenable.

In November, NSW Branch Secretary of United Voice, Mel Gatfield, told the Sydney MorningHerald:

For the first time in 24 years, every cleaner will have to reapply for their job, with many facing an anxious wait to see if they will have a job come July next year. After years—and in some cases, decades—of service to their school, many cleaners fear that finding another job will be next to impossible, particularly in regional areas.

As many as 7,000 cleaners were left anxious and worried over Christmas. Thanks to the hard work of Ms Gatfield and the United Voice, the Government has backed down. In February, it was announced that cleaners who were already in their jobs would not have to reapply and United Voice secured important concessions on entitlements. In the wake of the cleaners' victory, a primary school cleaner, Alison Redman, said to me:

We're all so relieved that we now have job security and our hours guaranteed, and can go back to taking care of our schools.

What this Government tried to do, and would have succeeded in doing were it not for the campaign launched by United Voice, was deeply concerning. All school cleaners play a vital, often unacknowledged, role in our society. Without them, schools grind to a halt. We all remember the school cleaners strike in 2004, which caused schools across the State to close. Just like everyone else, school cleaners deserve fair pay, fair conditions and job security. We are living in a time when the workforce is increasingly casualised. For many people job security has become a thing of the past, which is a worry.

The rise of the so-called gig economy means many people are forced to live hand-to-mouth. How can people be expected to build their lives when they are worried about getting enough work to pay the rent next week? Forcing school cleaners to reapply for their jobs and forcing them to take short-term contracts shunts them into this difficult lifestyle. This is an issue close to my heart. For 24 years, my mum, Roma, was a school cleaner at Weston Infant School in the electorate of the good member for Cessnock.

I know how hard she worked. I know how important her work was to her school. Her work, her wage was crucial to keeping my family going. I applaud United Voice for standing up for their members and forcing the Government to the negotiating table. I salute my mum and every cleaner in New South Wales for working so hard and doing such an important job. Imagine a hospital without good cleaning staff: What sort of risk would that place on the patients and staff? A hospital would not be place that was hygienically safe without the wonderful cleaners, who are often not acknowledged. I thank each of the cleaners at Parliament House, who are wonderfully hardworking people. I love to see them here in the morning.

Mr Damien Tudehope: Hear, hear.

Ms SONIA HORNER: I am pleased that all the Government members present in the Chamber agree. I call upon the Government to prevent the casualisation of the State's workforce and the erosion of pay and conditions. Every worker deserves security.

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (13:15):

In reply: I express disappointment that this important debate about the most vulnerable people in our society has been gagged by the Government. This motion was put forward in November last year. Government members know when they put their motions forward that they will have precedence and be dealt with in 24 hours. The rest of us have to wait. I wait and wait for my important motions to be dealt with. I acknowledge those members who have made

contributions to the debate: the member for Ku-ring-gai, the member for Cessnock, and the member for Epping. I am sorry that the contribution of the member for Shellharbour was so good that the Government determined to cut it short. It shows how wonderfully well she was speaking. I am also disappointed that the member for Lakemba did not get an opportunity to make a contribution.

In 1994 the Greiner Government outsourced cleaning. I know that I am old, but I was not a member of Parliament at that time. If I had been I would have spoken in caucus about that notion. Nevertheless, we are dealing with what the Government was prepared to do late last year to the livelihoods of our most vulnerable and hardworking people. Again, I thank each and every one of the cleaners in New South Wales for their hard work. The member for Ku-ring-gai also acknowledged cleaners and made some good points, but he got off the track and talked for some time about land titles services, which is a pity because it has no relevance to cleaners. We are trying to acknowledge today their hard work and to ensure that we protect their working conditions.

There was no acknowledgement from the Government of the hard work of the union to protect the rights of cleaners, or of the hard work of cleaners to ensure that their jobs and livelihoods are protected. I acknowledge the valuable points made by the member for Cessnock. He spoke about how the Government was trying to shave 30 per cent off the cleaning contracts, which effectively would mean a loss of 30 per cent of labour. That would have meant that cleaners would have had to work shorter hours and do more work. In the end, it would have affected the conditions of our schools, and we do not want that. The member for Cessnock made the good point that teachers do as much as they can to assist cleaners but that cleaners have only six minutes to clean a classroom, which is crazy. They are run off their feet, poor things, and we need to consider that in the future.

The member for Epping read the motion but he is out of date. It seems that he is not aware that I gave notice of this motion on 21 November 2017 and only now is it being debated. I acknowledge the changes made by the Government but we must protect the most vulnerable people in our community, many of whom are cleaners. My mother did not have many opportunities when she was growing up in an orphanage. She was pregnant to my dad when she was 14. I consider her to be an example of a person who was vulnerable. I urge members to support my motion.