

Shorten admits AWU dues might be paid by business

Editorial, The Australian, June 22, 2015

Bill Shorten is trying to frame the controversy about his dealings as Victorian and national secretary of the Australian Workers' Union as a test of whether he was an effective union leader. But at issue here are specific matters which he will have to address with detailed answers.

Generalisations such as those he dished up on ABC TV's *Insiders* yesterday — "I've spent my whole working life standing up for workers" — just won't cut it. The Labor leader made a telling concession during his interview with Barrie Cassidy, when asked if the AWU received union dues paid directly by companies. "It's entirely possible," said Mr Shorten, "but what I don't know is, it wasn't the practice of the union as its preferred model and furthermore, I don't have at my hands all of the detail of all of the claims being put to me."

Examples of payments being made by companies to unions have been one of the most disturbing revelations of the Trade Union Royal Commission. There are a number of examples involving the AWU. They raise numerous questions about whether workers were being signed up to unions without their knowledge or consent, whether companies were making cosy deals with unions to buy industrial peace and, ultimately, whether workers could have been disadvantaged by these deals. Instead of guaranteeing that such deals have not occurred or expressing angst about their implications, Mr Shorten has avoided specifics and is holding his tongue until he fronts the commission.

On one level it is sensible for Mr Shorten to wait until he knows exactly what documents and evidence the commission wants to quiz him on, so he can reacquaint himself with the details of deals dating back many years. To this end he has brought forward his appearance by almost two months. But the reason he needed to do this was to minimise the pain of constantly refusing to answer media questions in the interim. He has dodged answers at press conferences and failed to respond to written questions. Yet, in the midst of all this, he turned up on *Insiders* to pitch his defence.

On the ABC Mr Shorten was not pressed on the significance of his admission about payments from companies. He was not grilled on whether he was directly involved in such payments. Cassidy did not ask whether this meant workers could have been signed up to the AWU without their knowledge. Nor did he ask how this admission sat with evidence Mr Shorten gave to the 2002 Cole royal commission when he said the AWU would not accept dues without signed forms from workers. There was also no pursuit of evidence that some Enterprise Bargaining Agreements from Mr Shorten's time at the union actually left some workers worse off. No doubt the opposition leader will cite this ABC interview as his effort to clear the air before his royal commission appearance and use it to sidestep more media questions. This is a transparent tactic to avoid scrutiny and could only have been foiled by aggressive questioning on the ABC. We would prefer some answers.

All the same, some media have pre-emptively declared that Mr Shorten's position is "untenable". We don't believe it is the place of media organisations to dictate the leadership decisions of the Labor Party — recent history shows these issues are enough to befuddle the ALP, let alone outsiders. But, more to the point, for all his media management games, Mr Shorten deserves the opportunity to deal with these issues at the commission. Despite justified concerns about the fairness and transparency of what has transpired, there has been no evidence, thus far, pointing to illegal practices. The opposition leader faces enormous political challenges outside these issues — with policy dilemmas on border protection, climate change, fiscal repair, national security and ALP reform — but he must be given the chance to deal with the royal commission revelations in a thorough manner. Mr Shorten is right to argue that modern trade unionists have needed to work hand-in-glove with employers to promote enterprise agreements that secure not only pay and conditions but ongoing jobs and prosperity. He must be given the chance to explain his actions and demonstrate that all payments and memberships were above board and transparent — and, importantly, fair.