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ETU ISSUES WARNING: STAY SAFE ON COVID-19 OR FACE CLOSURE

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) today warned builders and electrical contractors to get real about preventing the transmission of COVID-19 on their worksites or face being closed down on safety grounds.

Last week, the Union called for major infrastructure projects to remain open and be brought forward as a cushion against the sharp economic downturn. The Union said this should only happen if the advice of the Chief Medical Officer was closely followed to protect the health and safety of workers. Today, ETU National Secretary, Allen Hicks reminded bosses this was not a blank cheque for reckless behaviour.

“The health and safety of electrical workers is an absolute priority during this pandemic crisis. While we support work continuing the entire construction industry must act responsibly and collectively to minimise the risk of infection to workers and to the public,” said ETU National Secretary Allen Hicks.

“We have strong concerns that some worksites have not heeded the message from unions, medical authorities and mandates of Government.

“Our continuing support for construction sites to remain open is predicated on builders and electrical contractors doing everything they can to ensure workers and the public are safe.

“The continuation of the construction industry is vital to the Australian economy, but our first priority must always be to protect people’s health.

“If builders and electrical contractors are not enacting stringent health and safety protocols immediately, the ETU will be recommending members on those sites to cease work immediately and go home to contain the spread of this virus.”

Mr Hicks said the ETU will actively pursue any builders or contractors who have not changed their work practices to meet the strict safety protocols and hygiene measures required to protect workers and the public.

“Any worker that has concerns that the correct hygiene and safety practices are not being adhered to should contact their union immediately.”

The ETU and other construction unions have been working hard to ensure construction sites are as safe as possible and remain open during the COVID-19 outbreak provided builders and electrical contractors adopt strict safety protocols.

Measures that must be adhered to include:

- Small numbers of workers in hoists, maintaining the recommended social distancing;

- Staggered start times for all building and construction workers to reduce large gatherings or groups at start times;
- Staggered meal breaks and maintaining a minimum of 1.5 metres from work mates at all times;
- Implementation of pre-entry sight screening measures;
- Limit the numbers in your work group and work areas;
- Avoid contact with the public;
- Use sanitiser or hygiene products before and after meal breaks, toilet breaks and contact with common equipment;
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and for a minimum of 20 seconds;
- Amenities areas such as lunchrooms, break rooms, and toilet areas need to be kept meticulously clean and repeated cleaning on sites must occur;
- Additional provisions for on-site parking should be provided to avoid public transport where possible;
- Maintain a minimum of 1.5 metres from work mates at all times.

Mr Hicks said that no task should be undertaken where it requires workers to be in close proximity to each other, certainly not within 1.5 metres of each other.

No worker should attend job sites if they have any flu or cold like symptoms.

“It is absolutely critical that if anyone in the industry believes they may have the virus they must self-isolate and seek medical advice immediately,” Mr Hicks said.

Workers have a lawful right to refuse to work in areas where there is an imminent risk to their health and safety.

“The ETU will strongly support any member who refuses to work in any area where they think their safety will be compromised.”

The ETU also called on the National Cabinet to take the extraordinary but necessary step to shut down all non-essential industries and pay workers to stay at home.

“Australians need certainty and clear unambiguous guidelines to follow to protect themselves and others from the risk of COVID-19,” Mr Hicks said.

“Obviously, Australian workers cannot afford to be left high and dry without an income. But equally, it is no longer sustainable or in the national interest to struggle on with business as usual.

“These are desperate times and desperate, immediate measures are needed to protect the health, safety and livelihoods of all Australians.

“The Federal Government should follow the lead of governments like the United Kingdom, where they have already agreed to pay 80 per cent of workers normal for employees unable to work due to the coronavirus pandemic. If the Federal Government was serious, it would shut down all non-essential industries for 5 weeks and provide workers four weeks pay, with employers providing one week pay. It is critical we appropriately fund a nationwide shut down to stop the pandemic.

“If modern economies like the United Kingdom can afford to do this then clearly the Australian Government can too.