

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Wednesday, 13 May 2020

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge

WITNESSES

Mr Luke Hilakari, Secretary, and

Ms Wil Stracke, Assistant Secretary, Victorian Trades Hall Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome, Trades Hall, to the table, to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian Government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We ask that all mobile phones be turned to silent. All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, and therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. We have asked that photographers and camera persons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of our Committee secretariat.

We invite you to make a brief opening presentation of no more than 5 minutes; we do cut you off. Please state your name, your position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes. The presentation will be followed by questions from the Committee. We invite you to make a presentation.

Mr HILAKARI: Can I thank the Committee for having us and thank the Chair, Lizzie Blandthorn. My name is Luke Hilakari; I am the Secretary of Trades Hall. I am joined by Wil Stracke, our Assistant Secretary, and our Chief of Staff, Danae Bosler at the back. Thank you for having us here today at what will be, I am sure, a long but important session of PAEC.

This has been a very difficult time for workers. You will all be aware of that. This has been a very tough period for us at the hall too, working, really, our butts off to make sure that people can remain well employed and to have an income coming in right now. What we have found is a weakness in our economy through insecure work. Forty per cent of our workforce are not in a full-time or part-time permanent job, and that has had an unusual impact on Australia because our proportion of insecure work is just so high. So what we have seen across our economy right now is many workers have been stood down, some have been retrenched and a number have lost significant shifts. A bunch of workers have done the right thing and they are working from home, and I think they have heeded your advice and the Premier's advice that if you can work at home you must work at home. But we also want to give a shout-out to our frontline and essential services workers, who have done us as a state so very proud. I think you had Lisa Fitzpatrick here yesterday—God bless the nurses on International Nurses Day. They have done sensational work, but many other people have kept our economy running too, so a shout-out to all of them.

We at the start of this pandemic took the unusual position of coming forward with the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. I think we were the very first groups—we must be—right at the top, where both the chamber and Trades Hall came together and asked for a jobs keeper allowance, and that \$130 billion was unprecedented. We thank the Prime Minister for coming forward and doing that work—and for the work of people in this state advocating for that too. Through that process, though, we have seen a number of people who have missed out. That is unfortunate, and we have been campaigning to try to stick up for those workers too. There are over 1 million migrant workers who are not entitled to either JobKeeper or JobSeeker allowance. We are very worried for their welfare, and we have been advocating for some time for them to be included. They are important to our economy. They are important enough for us to invite here to do the work, and we cannot let these people be put into some type of destitution. We have been articulating an argument for that for some time, with not as much progress as we would like.

Another group of workers that we care deeply about is casual workers. So if you have not been at that business for longer than 12 months, you also miss out on JobKeeper. You can be entitled to JobSeeker. Now, there is sort of a double whammy here, because the first group of workers who have sort of been let go were obviously

in retail and obviously in hospitality. The turnover rate for people in those sorts of jobs is about 60 per cent, so most people—who tend to be young but are not all young—will be missing out on that bunch of money, and that is needed right now for them. So we have been trying to get them included, but we have been unsuccessful to date.

There has been a response that we have had to do as a movement. We have just launched the JobScammer website to look at what is happening to JobKeeper, because we have seen a number of institutions rot that, and they are doing it through a number of ways. They are saying that they are sort of picking and choosing who can start—so Jimmy might get the JobKeeper allowance that Jane misses out on.

We are having problems with people being demanded to do extra hours. The unique proposal put forward by the Prime Minister meant it was a \$750 flat rate regardless of the hours that you did. It does not matter if you did 10 or it does not matter if you did 30—you got the \$750. We are having a number of employers coming forward and saying, ‘Well, actually, if you get the \$750, I want you to work up to that amount of hours’. That is against the law, but that is happening quite frequently. We have had a number of employers who asked for kickbacks to say, ‘All right, I’ll give you the \$750, but you are gonna put \$200 in my pocket too’. That is appalling, and we have had a number of cases like that come forward.

On the upside, we have had some terrific action from the State Government. International students was a package that came out of them that offered \$1100 to keep them going. That is a Federal Government responsibility, but we have got, what, 40 000 international students? These people need to be looked after, so we are very pleased about that. We are very pleased that the Parliament took action for renters too. We have had a number of workers come forward and we have seen them actually being removed from their houses, and that stopped, which is great. The Working for Victoria program we think is a terrific initiative. That \$500 million, of which \$50 million has been put aside for regional Victoria, is a big deal—and the Hotels for Heroes. So we are very impressed with the work of the State Government. Collectively you have managed to crush this pandemic, and while we are not through it all the way yet, without your collective and decisive action we would not be where we are right now. I have got 8 seconds left, and I will leave it at that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will call Mr Maas, MP, first.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Mr Hilakari, for your presentation, and thank you, Ms Stracke, as well, for your attendance today—and for your attendance too, Mr Hilakari. The affiliates that you have cover both private sector workers and public sector workers, so I might ask you some questions in relation to both of those types of workers. Would you be able to explain, in terms of the public sector workforce, how the Victorian Government has been able to help those workers? Namely, I am thinking of programs such as guidance notes that have gone out and the industrial relations framework that has been set.

Mr HILAKARI: Yes. Right at start of this pandemic we called for a special leave for public sector workers—but all workers across this nation—so that if you needed to get tested or needed to be quarantined you would be able to do that but still be able to be on the books and be paid and have an income come through. The State Government acted pretty quickly on that. We have also been pleased that the State Government has taken action to make sure that casuals have been protected—so they will be receiving the equivalent of a JobKeeper allowance—and that people could be redeployed across the service, which is terrific. When you look at a group of workers who have not been left behind, who have been well protected, it will be the public sector workers—and so should they be, because I know any number of them, and so do all you, and right now they are working their butts off to keep this state safe. So yes, congratulations for your actions.

Mr MAAS: They are doing extraordinary work under extraordinary pressure at the moment. In terms of private industries and private sector workers, which workers do you see being most impacted by the pandemic?

Mr HILAKARI: It is interesting. You can break it up into industries and you can break it up into type. If I thought about the most severely impacted workers, I would think of undocumented workers in this country. There are about 100 000 undocumented workers, which means they have no status but they are here. They were already the most exploited group of workers going around. Many of them pick our fruit and veg. A lot of them are in horticulture and agriculture, but you will also find them in hospitality in Chinatown and various areas like that—a little bit in manufacturing but not so much. These are workers who would have otherwise been afraid to come forward to health services because they would be afraid of being mixed up with border force, because

they technically do not have a status to be here. What we would like to have seen for those workers is to make sure that there were some guarantees for them that they would be safe in this country. I could think of nothing worse than those people, who were already exploited, who then will not have a job and be afraid to come forward to a health service during a pandemic. That is a nightmare for that to exist in the community, and so some action around that group of workers is very sorely needed—as well, on top of that, as amnesty and a path to citizenship.

The next workers would be, collectively, migrant workers who have been stood down. They do not have an income coming in right now, and I am very worried for their welfare. I do not believe the charity sector has the resources to look after an extra million people, so that is a huge issue. Telling them to go home is not a solution. For many people this is their home; they have been here for 10 years, they have families here, they have a community around them. For many, they cannot get home because borders are shut and they cannot get a plane, and they have no money for the flight anyway. So that is a real problem that needs to be addressed across this nation.

If you look at industries, the airline industry most obviously is in a lot of pain, and the associated businesses that service that industry. We feel very sad that a number of them have missed out on JobKeeper whatsoever just because of being owned by a foreign country. These are Australian workers. We should look after them. We are very disappointed that they have not been taken care of. And then you can go through the industries which have most obviously have fallen off, which are hospitality and retail—you all know them in your communities—and then you see the flow-on to manufacturing, who cannot get goods in from overseas. So it has been very difficult. If I had to order them, it would be roughly like that, but it has been pretty tricky.

Mr MAAS: If we could go to those two cohorts that you mentioned then—there was the migrant cohort, if I could put it like that, and then there is the industry cohort—how could those two groups be assisted at government level?

Mr HILAKARI: Well, one bit for migrant workers—that is really a Federal Government responsibility. They should just be included in the JobKeeper allowance. The way the legislation was passed, as many of you will know, that is up to Treasurer Frydenberg. With the stroke of a pen he can make the changes by regulation. We are advocating for him to make that change. The current JobKeeper fund looks like it will be an underspend of \$20 billion. If that is the case, well then we have the money to include these people. There is no need for them to suffer.

When it comes to industry, that is the job of both State and Federal to get involved, and we are very pleased to see the over \$1 billion package that the State Government has put forward. What we would be thinking about is what is next when we get through this bit of, sort of, this next change; and what we would be looking for is industries, workers and VCOSS to get together and probably have some type of committee of sorts to plan together about what is the next step forward. We have a lot to be proud of in this state, but how can we best leverage it so we can accelerate out of this curve rather than slowing things down by, like, dropping JobKeeper too soon and stuff like that.

Mr MAAS: I would just like to talk to you about consultation with the Victorian Government and if you would be able to enlighten the Committee just as to, firstly, whether trades hall has been consulted and how that engagement is progressing.

Mr HILAKARI: Engagement has been good. We have strong and healthy working relationships with various Ministers, which has been terrific. Where we have had issues we have reached out. We have also had the Treasurer come and brief our executive and we have regular dialogue with the department of health. They offer regular briefings to give us a sense of what is going on across the state, which informs the workforce about what we can do. So, yes, it has been a pretty helpful relationship. We have had no blockages.

Mr MAAS: At this point, Chair, I might cede my time to Ms Stitt.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Chair, and welcome, Mr Hilakari and Ms Stracke. Thank you for the work that you are doing on behalf of many, many Victorian workers. It is obviously a very busy time and I know that there are a lot of complex industrial issues that you are dealing with right across the Victorian economy, so thanks for making the time to come today. Could I ask about the \$500 million Working for Victoria initiative that the

Victorian Government has set up and how you see that assisting Victorian workers and union affiliates that you represent.

Ms STRACKE: The Working for Victoria Fund, the \$500 million, we have welcomed. It is a fantastic initiative. It is a very simple idea, which is that you take workers who have lost their jobs as a result of the virus and you place them in the kinds of roles that have arisen because of the crisis. So you take workers and you have them in cleaning roles that now need to be done in our public transport and in other areas across the state. There is community service, there is support for older Victorians, those kinds of roles, which are all related to what has happened with the virus. So it is a simple idea.

I have to say I commend the Government and our public service for the way that they have been able to roll this out. It is complicated to roll that kind of thing out, and they have done an amazing job, I think, of getting it out. They have just announced something like 2500 jobs. That is specifically focused primarily in the cleaning space, although some have also gone out into the community sector space through councils as well as through private contractors that do that kind of work. So there has been a spread of regional and metro. I think that process will continue and I think at some point it will also turn its mind to the recovery stage of the virus as well—not just crisis management, but what happens afterwards and how we make sure our community is ready for that.

Ms STITT: Mr Hilakari, you mentioned that there had been quite a bit of work done on talking to the State Government about the public sector workforce and the industrial framework for those workers. Can you comment a bit on the agreement that has been reached in relation to casual and fixed-term workers in the public sector?

Mr HILAKARI: Yes. This was a pretty exciting announcement when it came out, and unique. It is something that other states and federally should look at. What we wanted to make sure was that during this period no casuals would be left effectively unemployed, seeking JobSeeker. These people have a terrific set of skills that are needed just right now and are needed to be redeployed. So reaching that agreement where these people will not miss out, where they will be kept on the books, where they will be kept close to this public sector, we thought was a terrific outcome. The next couple of weeks we will see how these people get redeployed. Certainly from what we are hearing back from public servants themselves, they are thrilled that this action was taken, and it happened relatively quickly as well, which is terrific.

Ms STITT: Terrific. In relation to that other cohort that you have mentioned, the international students, who are obviously in a pretty vulnerable position, the \$45 million that the Victorian Government has committed in that package for international students, can you give the Committee a sense of just what kind of difference that is going to make for these individuals?

Mr HILAKARI: Yes. So this was a great announcement. The \$1100 is going to make a difference. It is not the JobKeeper allowance, and the State does not have the capacity to do that for all international students nor migrant workers. What it will mean, the difference, is that they will be able to put food on the table and pay their bills. Their coming to this State—I do not need to tell you guys how important our international education is here. It is our major exporter. It is a big deal. The unique thing that we want to see out of this is that it looks like a number of universities will come forward and co-match this. So this \$1100 could then become \$2200, of which that sort of will get people through for an extra couple of months. It will not be fancy living, but it will pay the bills, it will put food on the table. That is the type of thing we should be doing to make sure that people we have invited to this nation and to this state are kept well.

Ms STITT: Obviously there are quite a few different groups that are not covered currently by JobKeeper, but I notice there is some commentary in the media this week around some federal MPs calling for JobKeeper to be pulled back earlier. Would you care to comment on that and what you think the impact of that would be if it were to come to pass?

Mr HILAKARI: Yes. I would be extremely worried if this was ended too soon. If you look at something like the GFC, you can see lots of commentary from Ben Bernanke when he went through. He thought you need to put more money in as fast as you can and directly into workers' pockets as quickly as you can, because you want that money spent. There are going to be a number of businesses that will be struggling in six months time. Putting money in workers' pockets so that money can travel through the economy so those businesses can get

up and going is exactly what is needed. If you roll this back too soon, all that is going to do is slow our recovery. I think it is madness that people are looking to penny pinch at this time, especially when that money has already been allocated: there is a \$20 billion underspend. So it is a lot of money, but the alternative is we have a slower economy, and that will mean less people in work and less businesses doing well.

I did not hear all of Paul's comments before, but I would imagine the chamber and I would be on a unity mission on this type of stuff, because this allowance was so important. I am very proud that we had an alliance in place to try to win it in the first place. Now that it is done and businesses are getting used to implementing it—because the money has only just flowed through, on 1 May—it needs to stick, because there is an expectation put out there that until 1 October it will be going, and my view is it should go for longer.

Ms STITT: Mr Hilakari, if it was to be pulled back earlier, do you think there are health and safety implications for workplaces and the community if workers had that income cut off?

Mr HILAKARI: Yes. There are a number of problems if it gets cut off. I will probably, if you do not mind, talk about a casual problem as well, which is a bit of a flaw in the scheme. But if this goes too slowly and if people say, 'Well, actually we're going to stop it now', I think that is going to have a severe impact on the economy and what people will be doing.

The problem that we have got with JobKeeper and casuals is for those casuals who did less than 12 months at that business and are not entitled to it, they are going to be the last people also to go back to work, because if you have got a subsidy coming into your business where I am paying Wil \$750 out of the Federal Government's money—I will take Sam as my new employee—and Sam was here for less than 12 months and he was a casual, he is the last one to come back on the books because nobody is giving me \$750 to keep him around. So there is another flaw in the system that I think needs to be addressed and looked at. It has not been discussed, but it will be the problem coming. No-one has sort of publicly raised it yet, but that is what we are thinking about. And again it will be hospitality and retail workers.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The Member's time has expired, so I will pass to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, secretaries, for appearing today. Look, I first did want to touch on workers left behind, but you have covered that fairly extensively. In our discussions with Minister Pakula he did mention that the government was considering support for temporary visa holders. Just as the State Government has stepped in for international students, other states have stepped in for temporary visa holders. Is that something you would be supporting and pushing for?

Mr HILAKARI: Absolutely. We would be very excited about a package like that. We have had thousands of workers approach us and talk about issues about not being able to pay their rent and put food on the table, and they cannot escape this country. We have invited them here to do work, and we actually need them to do this work. If this nation and this state is going to recover, they are going to have to be out on the farms and the factories doing the job they have been absolutely brought here to do. If we are to be good guests, well, we should treat these people as well as we would treat any other guest that has citizenship here in this country. Ideally that would mean they would go on to JobKeeper. But failing that, I think the state should step in, like they did for international students. And if the package was similar to the international students' one, I think that would be pretty good.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Thanks. And what about the local government sector as well and local government workers?

Mr HILAKARI: I think you have got the ASU Secretary, Lisa Darmanin, coming to speak maybe tomorrow, Chair, I am thinking.

The CHAIR: Next week.

Mr HILAKARI: It might be next week. So that would be a great question for her, but a number of councils I do not think have played the most productive role. A number of those workers have been stood down when a number of these councils have large surpluses banked. They could have found opportunities to redeploy that workforce. They have not done that. I am personally disappointed in them. This is an all-of-community effort, right? So the Federal Government are in \$130 billion and everything else. This state is in. Well, we have seen

some local councils really do the right thing, but others have been very disappointing. Do you have anything to add to that?

Ms STRACKE: Some councils I think have been really creative. We have had to close certain areas like rec centres and libraries and those sorts of things. There have been some councils who have been really fantastic at thinking outside the box around what they can do to make sure that they keep those workers gainfully employed and giving them other roles that are needed now, whether that is welfare checks on elderly people in the community or whether that is tree planting, which they would normally do at another time—finding things for them to do. I think we should definitely acknowledge the councils that have been doing the right thing. I think that when you talk to the ASU, when Lisa Darmanin comes here, she will have potentially some examples around some councils who maybe have not been as creative in how they have approached this.

Mr HILAKARI: You will probably get a very frank appraisal.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. And do you think there is scope for any extra State Government support? I mean, New South Wales have provided a package of support to council workers.

Ms STRACKE: Quite a bit of the Working for Victoria funding is going out through local councils. They have all put in, I think, expressions of interest around that. As part of that they are getting the opportunity to deliver services to communities where they identify needs as a result of COVID-19. They are drawing certainly at this moment quite a bit of the support that comes through Working for Victoria.

Mr HIBBINS: I want to touch on now the opportunities for recovery: what Trades Hall priorities are for both recovery and—you mentioned earlier about insecure work being a real structural problem—whether you are looking for greater structural change in the economy going forward?

Mr HILAKARI: Yes, I think there are plenty of opportunities. Now is the time in which people should start to dream about what a new world would look like. I think there is going to be a fair bit of change because there have been a lot of people who have been working from home, and I think if you had told everyone six months ago we would get most of the workforce working out of their house people would have said, 'That's impossible', and then in a couple of weeks they had turned it on. For some people that is going to be something that is going to be a more permanent fixture which changes work in a whole lot of different ways. So that is something that we are going to have to look at, because on one level there will be savings for businesses by not having to rent out premises the size that they do, but then there become obligations on workers to pay for electricity and data and everything else. So there is some discussion about that. There are some people who have changed their job right now, be it through the program or through anything else—who might have been an aviation worker but is now doing some care work, and they might say, 'Well, rather than hauling bags, I like working with people'. So I think there will be some shifts like that.

Insecure work absolutely needs to be addressed, and there needs to be less of that in this nation and more permanency in terms of what type of entitlements. There should be a national entitlement about paid pandemic leave for 14 days for any worker across this country who has received it, including gig economy workers who are absolutely workers who get overlooked but have been so essential right now. I think that is a big deal.

Local manufacturing: when we look around and see how hard it can be at times to get PPE—we have got one company up in Shepparton with 17 workers. That could be turbocharged. Local manufacturing has never been more important than right now, so I would be looking at things like that.

OH&S laws: I think we are going to have to relook at guidance notes about what is safe hygiene and practice, and there will be some thinking that needs to be done at a pretty high level about pandemic response and how a nation can be better prepared for that.

Anyway, we have got a thousand things we would like to talk about in this space, but I think that could be best served by a group of community leaders sitting together with government to see if we can come up with something collectively together.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, team Trades Hall. Mr Hilakari, with regard to the Cedar Meats cluster that has been in the news a lot, are you comfortable with workers'—and I am sure union members'—rights and health

being pushed aside in the interests of the Government protecting a company's reputation and brand? What is your view?

Mr HILAKARI: I do not think that happened.

Mr RIORDAN: You do not think?

Mr HILAKARI: No, it does not look like that happened.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, so do you have a problem then with a three-day wait—and in some cases it was seven days—at Cedar Meats for DHHS to order testing of workers, and do you consider that that is a satisfactory amount of time to wait for workers to be tested when there has been an outbreak in a workplace?

Mr HILAKARI: With this we trust the advice and the work of the Chief Health Officer and their team. What I understood was that when the person was identified having the first incident, that person was not at work. There is a balance that needs to be struck here between the right to privacy for that worker and also the right for workers to know. The businesses will have some rights too about their own reputation, about how they get this job done. Does this mean we are going to have to spend some time looking at OHS laws and how meat factories are set up and the rest of it? Well, probably into the future, but I thought people were pretty clear from the Chief Health Officer to Brendan Murphy, the Chief Medical Officer, that this was handled really well. That is what they were saying.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, so you have no problem with a seven-day delay in other co-workers in, as you know, a boning room—a lot of people in them—

Mr HILAKARI: A lot of people in them.

Mr RIORDAN: There could be 60 or 70 people at close quarters. You would not have thought that that should be treated much more quickly than seven days?

Mr HILAKARI: Look, I am not sure. I was not across that, but I am taking the advice from the Chief Health Officer and the Chief Medical Officer that they said they thought this was done perfectly well.

Mr RIORDAN: So you do not have a problem then with a different standard for schoolteachers? We had, you know, one teacher at one school who was not even on the premises and the school got closed and had cleaning squads put through it immediately—

Mr D O'BRIEN: And is named.

Mr RIORDAN: and is named, and this workplace that has literally hundreds of employees is treated completely differently. There is no mixed message there for you and your members—teachers being treated better than union members?

Mr HILAKARI: Well, I think when it comes to a pandemic our job is to trust the advice of the people who are doing the work. They are scientists and they are doctors and they are nurses, and they are qualified to give a view and a direction about, like, what should happen in this community. So I am going to trust them on this.

Mr RIORDAN: You do not think teachers are being treated differently to meatworkers, hardworking meatworkers?

Mr HILAKARI: I could not imagine a public servant, and the hard people who are doing that work, will say, 'I think a meatworker is more important than a teacher'. I could not believe that would be the case.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay; all right. So we will just assume that seven days is okay for meatworkers and one day is what teachers—

Mr HILAKARI: I am not assuming anything. You are.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, you said it is okay.

Mr HILAKARI: I did not say that. You can look at the transcript.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, so you want to clarify that? So you do have a problem with it taking seven days for meatworkers?

Mr HILAKARI: I did not say that either.

Mr RIORDAN: So what are you saying?

Mr HILAKARI: I think I said to you that—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I think the witness made it quite clear that he was taking the advice of the Chief Health Officer. It is not your job to argue with the witness.

Mr RIORDAN: No. Sorry, Chair, the question is not to you. The question is to Mr Hilakari.

Mr HILAKARI: Well, I can re-answer the question.

Mr RIORDAN: Teachers get a workplace closed down, publicly named and industrial cleaners in in one day; meatworkers get seven days before they are even warned. And as for visiting truck drivers and all sorts of other people who have entered the premises, they do not get told at all.

Mr HILAKARI: I think the presumption that you think public servants who are working their butts off to make sure that this virus is crushed are picking and choosing who gets preferential treatment or not is wrong. I think it is wrong.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I am not. I am asking you, as the representative of the workers—that is your job; we are not here making judgements on public servants and the CHO—do you think it is satisfactory for your members for one group of membership to be given industrial clean downs and a one-day notice and another group of workers seven days and no notice?

Mr HILAKARI: I do not think preferential treatment is going on.

Mr RIORDAN: Do you have another explanation for the huge difference?

Mr HILAKARI: I do not think preferential treatment is going on is what I have said.

Mr RIORDAN: Do you have an explanation? I mean, it is a big difference.

Mr HILAKARI: Look, I am not working as the Chief Health Officer or the Chief Medical Officer—that is not my qualification—but I trust their advice.

Mr RIORDAN: So it is fair to say then, in your view and the union's view, that the Government has handled the Cedar Meats outbreak perfectly okay?

Mr HILAKARI: That is your words. I am not—

Mr RIORDAN: Would you have a description for it?

Mr RICHARDSON: That is what Professor Murphy says.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I am not asking Professor Murphy. I am asking the representative of the workers—

Mr HILAKARI: Hang on a tick. You asked the question. So when the Prime Minister says they think it has been handled particularly well, when the Chief Health Officer says it, when—

Mr RIORDAN: Mr Hilakari, I do not think you often quote our current Prime Minister as a reference for your particular view.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, would you like the witness to answer the question or otherwise?

Mr RIORDAN: That sounds like an excuse of convenience. I am asking, as your representative of your workers here in Victoria—

Mr HILAKARI: Look, if you want to contradict your Federal leader, that is fine, but I think Prime Minister Morrison and the Chief Health Officer and the Chief Medical Officer said this was handled particularly well.

Mr RIORDAN: With regard to the McDonald's cluster, McDonald's has been very proactive, more so than the Government, in disclosing the cluster. Does the action of the Government not naming organisations with positive cases concern you and your members who may be at any workplace?

Mr HILAKARI: No, I rely on the advice of the Chief Health Officer.

Mr RIORDAN: At all times? So you do not—

Mr HILAKARI: Well, yes. Victoria has done so well getting through this pandemic—just so well. And they have done it because we have been relying on their expertise. If there is a reason to name a company or a workplace, well, I trust in that, and if they did not, well, there will be a good reason for that too.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. Mr Hilakari, a lot of organisations at this difficult time have chosen to waive fees and charges. Are all your members who are currently experiencing difficulty having their union fees waived?

Mr HILAKARI: Yes. We have got 40 different unions. So some have waived, some have set up funds to assist those who are in difficulty—so, to give payments. I think Ms Fitzpatrick probably would have spoken about the nurses fund yesterday. It would be a mixed bag, so I could not speak for all of them, but some have waived fees—

Mr RIORDAN: So you have not, sort of—

Mr HILAKARI: some have offered free membership and some have provided financial assistance, but there is not a blanket rule. It does not sort of work like that; we are not that top down.

Mr RIORDAN: So people who are on, for example, the JobKeeper payment, you have not just blanket waived all their fees?

Mr HILAKARI: So we are like a peak organisation, similar to VCCI; right? They would not give a ruling for every business on how to operate their membership fees or how to treat. We do not do that either. Unions are accountable directly to their own membership, so there will be a bunch of different rules in place at different unions. But as the secretaries come in, you should ask.

Mr RIORDAN: Another area that has had some interesting feedback is in the area of PPE. Certainly through my office and that of many of my colleagues there was a huge push from many large workplaces, particularly in the health industry but others as well, for lack of PPE. We heard yesterday, surprisingly actually, from Lisa with the Australian Nursing and—

Mr HILAKARI: Midwifery. Don't leave out those midwives.

Mr RIORDAN: Midwifery, yes. No, not all. We heard from her that there was not really a problem with access to PPE for staff, which I thought surprising as I know my colleagues here, all our offices, are being inundated with nurses, health professionals and others having to go and source their own PPE. Do you have a view on whether workers at this current rate should be having to go out and get their own PPE?

Mr HILAKARI: Look, I would think workers do not have to supply their own PPE. That should be supplied by the employer. I have not had a lot of complaints come to Trades Hall at all about supplies of PPE, but saying that, that might have gone to individual unions. We did have a shortage of hand sanitiser but the Government I think invested pretty quickly—was it a \$12 million or \$22 million fund—to get much more in, so—

Mr RIORDAN: So would it concern you that I have got an email here from disability workers who have no access to PPE unless one of their clients is diagnosed with coronavirus? So they have to risk getting infected before they get the PPE. Do you have a concern with that?

Mr HILAKARI: Look, I reckon that is a good question for the health and community sector union. But I would have thought that if an employee reached out to an employer and said, 'We would like PPE because we

are concerned for a reason' and that is supported by the science, then I think they should be supplied it by the employer.

The CHAIR: The Member's time has expired. That concludes the discussion with these witnesses from Trades Hall. We thank you very much for appearing before our Committee today. The Committee will follow up with any questions that were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five days of the Committee's request. Thank you very much for being here today.

Mr HILAKARI: Thank you, Committee.

Witnesses withdrew.