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# HOW RUNNING A UNION CAN MAKE YOU CROOK

Share a thought for David Asmar, whose wife Diane is state secretary of the Health Services Union (HSU) in Victoria. The unions royal commission has been wanting to question David for a long time about money in an AWU slush fund.

As he was leaving the country for Lebanon in September he was served with a summons. Last week he was not well enough to return to Australia to give that evidence.

Then there is former HSU national secretary and former MP Craig Thomson who has been convicted of 13 counts of theft. Evidence tendered at his trial showed that his mental state suffered while he was working at the union had contributed to his criminal behaviour.

Then there is Kathy Jackson, once also a national secretary of the HSU who turned whistleblower against corruption. She has been ordered to repay \$1.4 million of union funds which she used, without authority, for her own purposes. She has been unwell and treated in hospital. Her partner, Fair Work Commission vice-president Michael Lawler, has also been unwell, so unwell he had to take nine months' sick leave from his taxpayer-funded job.

The former president of the HSU Michael Williamson is probably not feeling that good. But he doesn't get paid sick leave.

He is doing a five-year stretch in jail for fraud against the union.

Then there is the former secretary of the NSW National Union of Workers, Derrick Belan. He was summoned out of a psychiatric hospital last week to attend the royal commission. He was excused on medical grounds but will have to give evidence if he gets well enough.

His niece Danielle O'Brien did give evidence. She has a problem with compulsive spending, which wasn't

helped by the fact she was the union's bookkeeper.

All these officials have been working to the detriment of their health in the service of union members. It shows how much the members really owe them. Why shouldn't they be well looked after?

members could be ripped off if there weren't officials like these to look after them.

There are companies out there that treat workers' money as if it were their own. They ought to be sued for everything they've got. They ought to have class actions brought against them to get the money back. They ought to be in jail. Why persecute a union, which is on the side of the good guys, when there are so many bad guys?

If you start

ing to a corporate regulator?

Don't people understand that would get in the way of their important work — which is stopping the bad guys? The work of unions is far too important to be weighed down with compliance obligations.

It is the role of unions to make sure that other people provide safe and supportive environments to work in. It is

Federal Labor hasn't joined any of the nitpicking over personal expenditure. Far from it.

Its criticism has been reserved for the royal commission — "a witch hunt", "a political stunt" — which has been putting pressure on these officials and, no doubt, making their health problems far worse. It helps that at least 50 per cent of Labor's MPs have been union officials.

They understand how these things work, they've seen it and they're not going to get too pious about it.

The real issue here, as federal Labor has pointed out, is the morality of the royal commissioner himself.

He once contemplated going to a Liberal Party lecture (but pulled out), which shows how the whole commission is biased and should be closed down so that things can get back to normal.

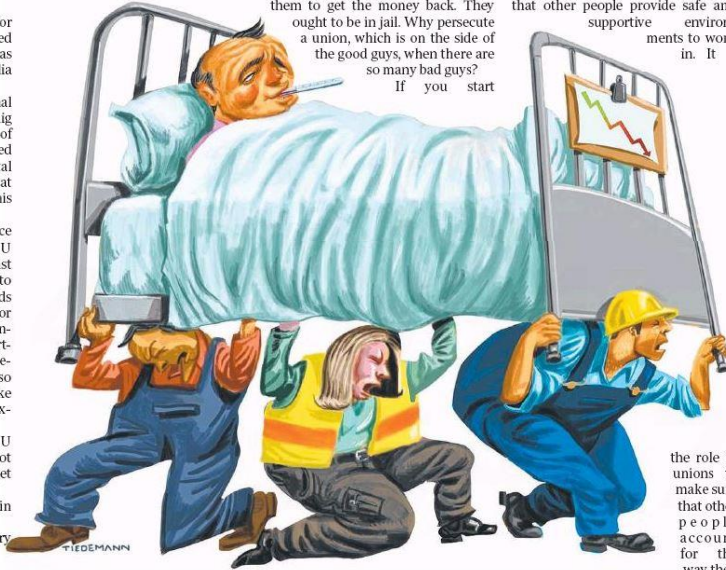
One thing that worries me a little bit is the members of these unions — the AWU, the NUW, but particularly the HSU — can be very lowly paid.

They don't have a lot of money to spare. Maybe they shouldn't have to pay union dues to cover, as the evidence has shown, trips around the world, or visits to brothels. It niggles a little at my social conscience. Could it be that powerful and wealthy unions are ripping off the little guy? Then I remember what social justice is all about. It is not about individual rights. It is about collective advancement. Social justice means dismantling the conservative power structure.

Therefore it can never be social justice to criticise an institution dedicated to the side of the worker. Whatever strengthens unions must be right and whatever weakens them must be wrong. If lack of scrutiny has contributed to some wayward union conduct over the years, who's complaining?

It can't be that bad as long as it was done in a good cause.

Peter Costello is a former federal treasurer.



the role of unions to make sure that other people account for the way they raise

and spend money.

But give credit where it is due. Union officials can't do it all on their own. Federal Labor has been supportive. It hasn't criticised any of this behaviour. Remember how Julia Gillard stood by Craig Thomson?

Now it is true that there are some people in the federal government and the royal commission who seem a little cynical about the benefits these union bosses have brought for the workers. It's clear they don't understand what unions are really for.

They don't understand how union

thinking that unions should start complying with the same standards as a company, who knows where it will end? How could officials possibly be held to the legal standard of a company director?

How could they survive all those reports and investigations and report-