

Timber protest

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

About 30 workers facing job losses at the Dormit timber mill in Dandenong South have protested outside Premier Daniel Andrews's electorate office in Noble Park.

The workers handed out 'double donuts' symbolizing "zero jobs and zero logs" at the Princes Highway shopping strip on Thursday 5 November.

They say they may be stood down without pay as soon as next week due to a shortage of Victorian timber despite the State Government guaranteeing supply until 2024.

Dormit telecant operator Robert Walerczak says he and his workers face a bleak festive season, with the timber yard "pretty close to empty".

"From what we've been told, the long and short of it is we're done by next week.

"Coming into Christmas, everyone is supposed to be having a good time celebrating with family and friends.

"But we're not sure we'll have anything to come back to. It feels pretty helpless.

"We've had ebbs and flows before, but never this bad. We've never been facing closure."

The workers' union CFMEU says a shut-down would lead to a national pallet "crisis" disrupting delivery of Christmas goods and supermarket supplies such as food, alcohol and toilet paper.

"Without pallets, you can't move goods. Pallets are critical for our economy and the transportation of goods," CFMEU manufacturing national secretary Michael O'Connor said.

He called for the Premier to "urgently" legislate to ensure timber supply as well as to provide financial support to stood-down timber workers.

"Why should our members and their families suffer because the Government is stuffing it up?"

The timber shortage was due to an "unprecedented" number of Supreme Court injunctions lodged against VicForests' harvesting from timber coupes, Mr O'Connor said.

Recently, environment groups such as Kinglake Friends of the Forest and Environment East Gippsland won injunctions to halt alleged improper logging in 27 Victorian forest areas.

Mr O'Connor called for the Government to legislate next week to prevent legal action against VicForests by third party litigants for "the sake of the Victorian economy".

He said it should be up to regulators, not "ill-informed activists", to manage VicForests and harvesters' compliance.

Meanwhile Mr Walerczak worries also for the timber workers' long-term futures.

With their unique "niche" skill-sets, it was uncertain where they could find alternative work, he said.

Under the State Government plan to phase out native forest logging, the reskilling of timber workers does not start until 2024.

"I'm going to keep my chin up and hope we have a job before I start looking elsewhere," Mr Walerczak said.

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Timber workers protest in Noble Park.

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Timber workers protest

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A State Government spokesperson said forestry contractors affected by the litigation would be supported with stand-down payments.

The litigation was putting “additional strain” on top of world-wide timber supply challenges.

“The Andrews Labor Government is working with industry to ensure there is minimal disruption to production.”

According to the Government, there was unprecedented demand for timber driven by post-Covid activity in housing, renovations, DIY and retail markets.

The shortage in timber pallets was partly attributed to businesses keeping pallets rather than returning them for recirculation.



CFMEU Manufacturing National Secretary Michael O'Connor says goods and supermarket food supplies ahead of Christmas are under threat.



The protest at Premier Daniel Andrews's office.



Robert Walerczak says he and his Dormit mill colleagues face a tough Christmas.



Dandenong South sawmill workers protest at Premier Daniel Andrews's electorate office in Noble Park on 25 November.

Jobs threat

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The owner of a Dandenong South timber mill says its 30 workers are likely to be stood down without pay in the lead-up to Christmas.

Pentarch Forestry, which runs the Dormit sawmill, said its closure was due to “vexatious” legal action by environmental groups against VicForests’ timber harvesting operations.

As a result, hardwood log supply was expected to run out within two weeks, it stated.

Desperate Dormit workers protested at Premier Daniel Andrews's electorate office in Noble Park, calling for urgent action to break the impasse and for financial support.

Another 30 workers would be stood down at Pentarch's mill in Swifts Creek, East Gippsland.

The two mills' production of 70,000 pallets a month would also grind to a halt, which is expected to cause major supply chain issues

for supermarkets and breweries.

“It's doubtful these self-interested groups have considered the financial and emotional hardship they are placing on our staff,” Pentarch chief executive Paul Heubner said.

“It's also difficult to comprehend what these groups are hoping to achieve when we are essentially operating in a tightly regulated forest industry.”

Mr Heuber appeared to back the CFMEU's call for urgent legislation to stop third-party litigants taking legal action against VicForests.

“Our timber is legally and ethically sourced but it appears the authority for policing timber production in Victoria is in the hands of activists bent on destroying our industry,” he said.

“We think it is time the legislation was reviewed to give that level of power back to the rightful authorities.”