

Morrisons's Anti-Benefits Bill threatens tens of thousands of working families

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Decades ago the Victorian branches of **National Electrical and Communications Association** and the **ETU** became joint sponsors of the *Protect Redundancy Fund*. This industry severance scheme was created to ensure that when electrical workers found themselves redundant or their employers go into receivership their entitlements are insured and they and their families are protected in their time of need.

There have since been more than 44,000 claims made since 2006 to Protect, with approximately \$343 million distributed to suddenly unemployed electrical workers. The liquidation of PSG and the Hastie Group are notable examples of when Protect has offered a lifeline to vulnerable workers and their families.

In addition to insuring the redundancy entitlements of tens of thousands of workers, NECA and the ETU have ensured that Protect is utilised to its full potential to support electrical workers and their families across their entire working lives.

In the past both NECA and the ETU have accepted periodic distributions from Protect's surpluses. With these distributions the ETU has created a "Distress, Hardship, Welfare and Training Fund". The fund utilises the surpluses and reinvests them into a wide array of training programs, grants and member benefits including free ambulance cover, free funeral cover, free return-to-work training and more. See the overleaf for the full list of benefits the surplus provides to members, their families and the wider community.

ETU Victoria Secretary Troy Gray says that "When our members face an emergency or are in their time of need, we're here for them. We cover their unforeseen costs such as ambulance and funeral as well as an extensive range of other support programs".

"When they find themselves out of a job, we give them the training to get back in to work. When they have a baby, we supply new born essentials to them. We give out thousands in grants each year to community groups our members care about. For 117 years the ETU have had our members' backs and these surpluses are critical to helping support them and their families through the good and the bad."

"ETU Victoria takes great pride in supporting our members and their families through all means at our disposal."

However, with their proposed “Anti-Benefits” legislation, the Morrison Government is seeking to smash these long-held benefits and programs and leave 18,000 electrical workers and their families out in the cold.

The Federal Government passed the *Fair Work Law Amendment (Proper Use of Workers Benefits) Bill 2017* through the lower house in late 2017. This ideological bill would impose conditions on worker entitlement funds that do not apply to any corporate or investment entity. It also gives the minister extensive and potentially dangerous powers to impose new rules at their own discretion which could adversely affect working families.

Most alarmingly the bill would outlaw the distribution of industry scheme surpluses to sponsors’ member benefit programs. Yet the option to send surplus funds to big business would remain.

“While corporate insurance schemes send their surpluses to Panama and the Bahamas, we invest the surplus back into the wellbeing of our members.” Says Mr. Gray.

“Never has there been a clearer contrast between the union world and the corporate world.”

Given the uncertainty around the future operations of industry schemes the Morrison Government’s proposed legislation has created, the employer association and the union have accepted the distribution of Protect’s surplus.

Accompanying the distribution is a facility agreement that both the employer association and the union will guarantee the fund should it ever fall into deficit. This ensures the redundancy entitlements of workers covered by the scheme remain protected as well as the benefits and community grants that improve the lives of those workers day in, day out.

Protect’s board of directors came to the decision to distribute their surplus unanimously. The then Turnbull Government afforded them little time to consider the impacts of the bill allowing for a mere two-hour review of the proposed legislation in Canberra only days ahead of its introduction to the House of Representatives. The Government will apply the proposed law retrospectively to the date of its passage through the lower house, should it ever pass the Senate.

“Through whatever challenges this anti-worker government throws at us, the interests and

welfare of our members will always be at the forefront of everything we do," says Gray. "By accepting the surplus, we have guaranteed the future of Protect and the future benefits that thousands of working people and their families rely on."

The ETU through its State Council has resolved this surplus can only be used for the continuation of the Distress, Hardship, Welfare and Training Fund and not for the industrial, political or operational work of the union.

"As we have done now for 117 years, the ETU will do whatever it takes to protect our members, their families and the community. Whatever it takes." Says Mr. Gray.

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Full list of benefits, training programs and grants funded by the Protect surplus.

- The construction and development of a new Centre for U that will offer to all ETU Members and their families:
 - Free Counselling Hotline
 - Free Domestic Violence Awareness Seminars
 - Free Postnatal Depression Awareness Training
 - Free Gambling Prevention Seminars
 - Free Anxiety and Stress Management Services
 - Free First Aid for Babies and Children Courses
 - Free Women's Self Defence Courses
 - Free Autism Behaviour Management Support
 - Free Legal Advice
 - Free Will Kits
 - Free Family Baby Packs
 - Free Emergency Transport Cover
 - Free Retirement Planning
 - Free Funeral Cover
 - Free U-Turn "Dayhab" Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Programs
 - Free Financial Counselling
 - Free and Discounted Registered Electrical Contractors (REC) Training
 - Free and Discounted First Aid Training
 - Free and Discounted Hazardous Wiring Training
 - Free and Discounted Height Awareness Training
 - Free and Discounted Asbestos Awareness Training
 - Free and Discounted Train Track Awareness Training
 - Free and Discounted Solar Grid Connect Training
 - Free and Discounted A-Grade Refresher Training

- Free and Discounted Solar Battery Storage Training
- Free and Discounted Temporary Wiring Training
- Free Preparation for Work Support
- Free Licensed Electrical Assessment (LEA) Tutorials
- Free Workplace Conflict Management Seminars
- Free Workers' Compensation Seminars
- Free Workplace Mental Health Support
- Free Suicide Prevention Awareness and Training
- Free Drug and Alcohol Awareness Training
- Free LGBTQI+ Inclusivity Training
- Free General Health Checks
- Free Skin Checks
- Free Eat Smart Programs
- Free Quit Smoking Support
- Free Injury Support and Prevention Consultations
- Free suicide prevention counselling including access to a 24/7 support hotline for members and their family;
- Free access to an ETU Welfare Officer;
- Access to an Apprentice Officer to help and mentor youth in the industry;
- Individual grants to support grassroots community and sporting clubs;
- Individual grants to electrical workers suffering distress, i.e. children gravely ill, medical expenses;
- Discounted health insurance;
- Discounted public liability insurance;
- Free access to a health and safety specialist;
- Sponsorship of social welfare programs in community, and community groups.