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Utilities: Energy

Energy privatisation puts emergency services at risk

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By ASU-NSW United Services Branch

The recent NSW storm crisis highlighted dangers in privatising the state's electricity retailers, with consumers facing dangerous delays during power emergencies, the ASU-NSW United Services Branch has warned.

In its submission to the Owen Inquiry, the Union argues that electricity retailers who put in an extraordinary effort to field 200,000 emergency calls during the Hunter Valley disaster over the Queen's Birthday long weekend would be put at risk under the plans.

NSW US Branch General Secretary, Ben Kruse, representing electricity retailer workers said plans to sell off electricity retail would severely compromise emergency response capability - putting extra pressure on frontline emergency services and leaving members of the public without access to potentially life-saving information and support.

"Retail energy workers were at the forefront of the recent Hunter Valley natural disaster, fielding thousands of calls about dangerous downed electricity lines and power cuts," said Mr Kruse.

"People might know to call 000, but sometimes they don't know if their situation is really serious - so they do the next best thing, they call their energy company."

The Union submission warns that privatisation of electricity retailers would:

- Threaten the viability of a 24 hour emergency electricity services
- Generate unnecessary service delays
- Diminish public accountability for mismanagement of emergencies
- Undermine customer safety

"The State Government's plan - with the full support of the Liberal Opposition - to sell off these jobs a week after the crisis is a sign of callous indifference to the thousands of energy workers that worked around the clock," said Mr Kruse.

Power crises identified in the report:

- One caller was a frantic mother who nearly collided with network powerlines lying across the road. An electricity retail worker told the woman to stay put and immediately dispatched an emergency crew to her assistance.
- In another call, a woman reported that downed telegraph wires were arching on the road in front of her house. She told an emergency call centre worker that her husband was trying to remove the live wires with two pieces of wood. The emergency call centre worker helped avert tragedy by dispatching an emergency crew and advising the woman to stop her husband handling the wires.

For more media comment contact Ben Kruse on 0419 623 984 or Tim Fitzsimmons on 0423 375 522

Contact Details

Name : Greg McLean
Telephone : (02) 9283 9280
Facsimile : (02) 9283 9270
E-mail : gmclean@syd.asu.asn.au
WWW : <http://www.asunational-archive.asn.au/utilities/>