



IR reform goes too far: Voelte

EWIN HANNAN
MATT CHAMBERS

WOODSIDE chief executive Don Voelte has called on the Rudd government to toughen up laws to deal with illegal strikes, as he declared the resource giant's timetable for shipping the first gas from its \$12 billion Pluto liquefied natural gas project was contingent "on a productive industrial relations environment".

While Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard has repeatedly labelled wildcat strikes by Pluto workers as unacceptable, Mr Voelte said the laws should be changed to ensure employees returned to work sooner once their action was deemed illegal.

"It's like a pendulum swung it too far one way with Work Choices. We're concerned maybe we swung it a little too far the other way," he said.

Woodside is a senior member of the Australian Mines and Metals Association, which this week called for legislative changes that would allow for immediate sanctions to be imposed on workers taking unlawful industrial action.

Asked what changes the company would like the government

to make to the Fair Work Act, Mr Voelte said: "It's not the issue of collective bargaining. We understand that and we accept that.

"When you have an agreement, we expect the unions to follow the law too. It took us eight days to get people back to work in an illegal strike.

"The area we'd like to focus on is, 'hey, once it's declared illegal, get back to work'.

"It's like a two-year tortuous battle to go through courts to pay fines for being illegal. It should be a bit different."

Mr Voelte said Woodside's target for the first liquefied natural gas exports in early 2011 was contingent on a "productive industrial relations environment" and the company had arranged emergency cargoes from other LNG producers for customers in the event of more strikes.

Ms Gillard, the Workplace Relations Minister, said the government would continue to take a tough position against unlawful industrial action.

"Unlawful industrial action is wrong," she told the National Press Club. "People should expect to be punished . . . to feel the full force of the law."

A spokesman for Ms Gillard said last night that throughout the Pluto dispute, Fair Work Australia ordered strikers back to work within 24 hours of illegal industrial action. "Workers chose to ignore those orders, and the Federal Court, just as would have been the case under the previous government's industrial relations system, issued an injunction ordering workers to return to work," he said. "As would have been the case previously, these orders took a number of days to serve on individual workers."

ACTU secretary Jeff Lawrence said yesterday Mr Voelte's comments showed that big business "continues to hark back to the days of Work Choices".

"The increase in profits reported by Woodside Petroleum exposes the hypocrisy of big mining companies calling for changes to Australia's industrial relations system," he said.

While further industrial action has not been threatened at the Pluto project, unions have refused to rule out further strikes.

Workers, many of whom are being pursued by contractors for \$22,000 fines over illegal strikes, said they were furious with the

Rudd government's retention of construction watchdog the Australian Building & Construction Commissioner, which they said was being used to attack them.

Militant West Australian Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union assistant secretary Joe McDonald, who attended a meeting of 2000 Pluto workers yesterday, said the federal government was deeply unpopular in the Pilbara.

"You wouldn't want to be a Labor Party politician in the northwest right now," he said. "The blokes think they've been betrayed by (Kevin) Rudd, by Gillard and (Resources Minister Martin) Ferguson. "They're seen as absolute traitors, (those) were the words that were used. The ABCC is still running around like thieves in the night."

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union state secretary Steve McCartney said Labor had turned its back on workers who felt vulnerable to court action by the ABCC.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING:
NICOLAS PERPITCH