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# PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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## ELECTORATE TALK

With Christmas approaching, there is a renewed burst of industrial unrest, but the dispute in the Department of Social Security has been going on for a long time because bans and limitations were first imposed four years ago.

The main union involved - the Administrative and Clerical Officers Association - is in effect claiming the right to determine staff numbers, a position which would surely be unacceptable to any private firm, and is certainly unacceptable to any elected Government; and they have also attempted to decide for themselves what duties they would perform, rather than carry out the work they were employed by the community to do. Thanks to the loyalty of the majority of the Departmental staff and the efforts of the Government all pensions and the bulk of other benefits are still being paid. But it is impossible to avoid disruption to the payment of some benefits - especially sickness and unemployment benefits - and to deal with all new applicants, and an increasing number of hardship cases exist which are having to turn to voluntary agencies for help.

Bans and limitations by A.C.O.A. members employed in the Department of Social Security were first imposed in 1977. Further bans were imposed during 1979 and 1980, and still further bans were imposed this year on the implementation of the new health arrangements for disadvantaged people, on new arrangements for handling unemployment benefit forms, on overtime, on certain interviews for unemployed and sickness benefits, and giving priority to representations from Federal Government members.

Every effort has been taken by the Government and the Department to meet the stated concerns of the union. A consistently patient approach has been adopted by management, especially because of the Government's overriding concern that pensioners and social welfare beneficiaries should not be inconvenienced further. But bans have continued in Victoria and New South Wales, despite considerable progress on staffing and conditions by the Government. In May 1980 a consultative working party on staffing and workloads was established. An amount of \$2.4 million was allocated in the last Budget for the upgrading of accommodation in regional offices. A comprehensive training programme was implemented, and additional intensive technical training is to begin shortly. The Department has been exempted from the 2% across-the-board cuts in staff ceilings this year. A temporary staffing allocation of 660 persons was made to administer the introduction of the disadvantaged persons health scheme - some 350 of that allocation, no longer required for that purpose, are to be retained until June to undertake an intensive training programme in the Department, and overall, staffing in the Department has increased from about 9,000 in 1976 to almost 12,400 today.

Senator Chaney has made it clear throughout that he would be prepared to discuss with the union its stated grievances on staffing and conditions matters, but he has rightly refused to negotiate while industrial action or the threat of such action still exists. Faced with a refusal to lift bans despite all that has been done, the Director-General of the Department of Social Security put staff on notice on 28 October that unless bans were lifted by 9 November the "no work as directed - no pay" provisions would be used. Bans were lifted except in N.S.W. and Victoria where employees implementing bans were placed on no work as directed - no pay. The dispute has further escalated in those States since then, with a campaign of rolling stoppages, destructive tactics in regional offices, and attempts by militant minority groups to take control of offices, harassing and physically intimidating officers trying to work. In one case a regional manager was held a virtual captive in his office.

On 4 December, Senator Chaney formally advised all staff in Victoria and N.S.W. that any officer who undertook disruptive or intimidatory actions, or refused to work as directed, would be dealt with under the provisions of the Commonwealth Employees (Employment Provisions) Act. Since that time over 400 employees have been stood down under those provisions.

The Government has at all times remained willing to discuss the union's stated grievances - although not in an adversary atmosphere while industrial action still continued. The union in these two States consistently refused or rejected this approach and in so doing demonstrated that it was willing to pursue its aims with scant regard for the welfare of the community. The Government has made a number of special arrangements to minimise disruption as a result of the dispute, but where people do not receive their usual benefit cheques on time, and are faced with serious difficulty, I suggest they go to the office of the Department of Social Security which they normally attend and apply for a counter cheque. Should that office be closed, they should seek emergency relief from a designated voluntary agency which the Commonwealth Government is assisting.

The Government is doing what it can not only to meet the needs of those directly affected by the dispute, but also to resolve the dispute. It was with the interests of the public in mind that the Government met on Friday last with the A.C.T.U. to discuss this dispute and other serious industrial matters. As a result of those discussions, the A.C.T.U. President, Mr. Dolan, is to put certain proposals to the Federal Secretary of the A.C.O.A., Mr. Munro, prior to a meeting of the Federal Executive of A.C.O.A. due to take place on Monday.

We want this dispute to end. Senator Chaney is prepared to consult with the unions, but we cannot concede the right of unions to determine staffing levels and we cannot agree to consultations while industrial action continues.