

A CAMPAIGNING UNION

Solidarity at sea prevails over safety breach

Offshore safety procedures were put to the test when a “high potential near-miss incident” occurred on the Castorone, the major pipelaying vessel for the Inpex project

On Saturday 25 July, the Chief Officer rebooted the Dynamic Positioning system with the pipe in the main line, however when the back-up DP system failed to engage or take over from the main system, the pipe started to travel back up the main line in an ‘uncontrolled’ manner.

Workers began hitting the emergency stop buttons at the stations in an attempt to stop the pipe from continuing on up the line toward the forward bulk head and out through the bow of the vessel.

None of the emergency stops activated the tensioners, nor stopped the pipe moving. There was no alarm sounded or warning raised from the bridge or when the activation of the emergency stops occurred.

Sheer luck no-one was killed

It was only through sheer luck that no-one was injured or killed as only moments before, workers were conducting a cleanup of the concrete debris around the rollers and around and under the pipe.

Our Health and Safety Representatives (HSR's) on board issued a ‘Provisional Improvement Notice’ (PIN) to Saipem regarding the emergency stops, the uncontrolled movement of the pipe and no alarms being raised or sounded.

Saipem disputed the PIN which then triggered an investigation and inspection by NOPSEMA (the offshore safety regulator) as per the Offshore Petroleum



and Greenhouse Gas Storage Act with the knowledge that the NOPSEMA inspectors could either uphold, vary or cancel the PIN.

Until that occurred, our members performed duties other than work on the main line as they had a reasonable belief that to resume full pipe lay activities would potentially expose them to imminent risk and or harm.

Disgraceful company threats

In the mean time, Saipem continued to bully and intimidate AMWU members into returning to work with all sorts of threats coming thick and fast but our members held the line, insisting they await the outcome from the inspection by NOPSEMA.

By Tuesday both Skilled (which was the first time workers had heard from their employer) and Saipem upped the ante by

starting to threaten workers by saying they were taking ‘unprotected industrial action’ and that the refusal to resume full work activities had nothing to do with safety!

Come Wednesday Skilled and Saipem applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) for a return to work order and took the highly inflammatory and unusual step of naming individuals in the order along with the AMWU.

On Thursday, we appeared before the FWC where we informed Vice-President Watson that NOPSEMA was currently on board the vessel and had been since Wednesday and were in the process on concluding their investigation and to issue a return to work order may not be consistent with the NOPSEMA findings.

Fair Work vindicates members

The FWC chose not to issue an order so our members have been completely exonerated of the allegation of taking ‘unprotected industrial action.’ In fact, the only adverse findings to come out of this has been from NOPSEMA against Saipem for potentially putting lives at risk during the DP reboot, and against both Skilled and Saipem for trying to put production above safety.

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We would like to congratulate our members who stood up for their rights under heavy handed pressure from their employers, but particularly our HSRs who stood up not only for themselves but on behalf of the entire workforce.

As one AMWU member on the Castorone at the time said, “The HSR reps were brilliant. Everything was written down and done by the book. We did everything right and we were vindicated.”

