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PM - Uniting Church pressures Woodside over workplace safety

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Reporter: Ashley Hall

MARK COLVIN: The Uniting Church has launched a stinging attack on Australia's biggest publicly traded gas and oil company, Woodside Energy.

The Church accuses Woodside of failing properly to investigate claims that staff who reported safety incidents during the construction of Victoria's Otway Gas Project have been sacked.

Woodside says its sub-contractor is responsible for the site's operations during the project's construction phase.

But, as a significant shareholder of Woodside, the Uniting Church is demanding answers.

Ashley Hall reports.

ASHLEY HALL: The Uniting Church doesn't usually take public swipes at companies.

But on this occasion, the Church's Director of Social Justice in Victoria and Tasmania Dr Mark Zirnsak says he has little choice.

MARK ZIRNSAK: We've been deeply concerned by allegations that employees have been sacked in relation to safety incidents. And after seven months of failed dialogue with Woodside, we felt we could no longer maintain private dialogue and that we needed to go public.

ASHLEY HALL: At the centre of the dispute is Woodside Energy's Otway Gas Plant which is under construction at Port Campbell on Victoria's Shipwreck Coast.

At least two people working on the site claim they've been sacked because they reported safety incidents.

One of them, a safety manager, says he was sacked when he refused to falsify an incident report after a mishap during the pressure testing of a pipe.

Another young staff member claims he was fired because his boss suspected he'd make a safety complaint.

MARK ZIRNSAK: If people build a perception, particularly if that perception is backed by reality that you can be sacked for reporting safety incidents, then you undermine the safety culture of the site.

It basically means that people will not report things that may place safety at risk and therefore you don't end up with a workplace where safety risks are being actively identified by all members of staff, with a view to making the site as safe as possible.

ASHLEY HALL: Neither of the former workers were employed by Woodside directly, In its construction phase, the site is controlled by a contractor, Technip Oceania.

So legally, the workers' relationship is with that company.

But the Church believes Woodside still has a moral responsibility to ensure they're looked after.

So why should Woodside care what the Uniting Church says?

MARK ZIRNSAK: The point is that we are shareholders in Woodside. Woodside's own safety policy states that they will ensure that their contractors and sub-contractors maintain a level of safety that Woodside would apply to its own operations. So to our mind that would mean a thorough investigations of allegations of this nature.

And as a church we have an ethical investment policy that we seek to, we take very seriously and we seek to ensure that the companies who we hold shares in are compliant with our ethical investment policy.

ASHLEY HALL: *PM* has sought interviews with representatives of both Woodside and Technip Oceania for this report, but neither agreed.

However, Woodside has indicated it's investigated the allegations and has been assured by Technip Oceania that the workers weren't sacked over safety complaints.

Woodside also insists it's been providing information to the Church about the incidents over several months.

But Dr Zirnsak says the company's not been taking the church's complaint seriously.

MARK ZIRNSAK: In our dialogue with them we were also concerned there were examples where we ended up feeling that they weren't aware of what was happening down on site.

They would tell us one thing, we would find evidence to the contrary and then on presentation of the evidence they would admit that indeed the evidence we had was correct and they weren't aware of it.

ASHLEY HALL: The Uniting Church is not the only group raising concerns about safety at the Otway Gas Project.

The Victorian State Secretary of the Construction Union, Martin Kingham says there've been disputes at the site since construction began.

MARTIN KINGHAM: We really welcome this stance being taken by the Uniting Church. You know being prepared to I suppose put their mouth where their money is.

ASHLEY HALL: Mr Kingham believes the Federal Government's move to limit union influence at work will prompt more organisations with a social conscience to campaign on behalf of workers.

Woodside says any allegations of improper conduct should be reported to the relevant authorities.

MARK COLVIN: Ashley Hall.