



CUTTING

CORNERS

**CLEANERS' STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE
WITH VICTORIAN SHOPPING CENTRES'
CONTRACT CLEANING SYSTEM**

CUTTING CORNERS:
Cleaners' struggle for justice with Victorian shopping centres' contract cleaning system

by John Bottomley and Margaret Neith,
with support from staff of United Voice

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Creative Ministries Network is grateful to all those cleaners who participated in this project, and trusted us with their concerns about the injustices they face working under the current contract cleaning system.

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FOREWORD

— ***A system of labour that cuts corners on workers' rights to dignity and justice at work was first condemned in Christian social teaching in 1891.***

— ***This report calls for respect for the vital work that cleaners do, for fair remuneration and for just working conditions.***

This report aims to amplify the voice of people whose work is often overlooked. It highlights the difficulty that shopping centre cleaners have in achieving a living wage and acceptable working conditions.

There is a long history of Christians as diverse as John Wesley and Pope Leo XIII calling for better working conditions. Wesley decried the situation of many workers in the industrial revolution who had to 'struggle with weariness and hunger together' because they were not paid justly and so could not put enough food on the family table.

The great 'Abrahamic religions', Jewish, Christian and Islamic, all listen to the words of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, where we find a story of a world very different to the one we live in today, where all people enjoyed good working conditions, took care of each other, and the creation around them (Gen 2:15, 2:5-6). Only later, where humanity famously has a falling out with God, does work become a curse for many (Gen 3:6-8).

Broadly, people of faith believe that when we are in right relationship with God and each other, and we respect creation, all aspects of our life become fruitful, including our working lives.

The Judeo-Christian Scriptures speak against those who profit through the exploitation of workers; God is 'against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan' (Malachi 3:5). Paul writes in a letter in the Bible that Christians have a right to command all those who are wealthy to be generous with their wealth (1 Timothy 6:17-19). In the Islamic faith, the Prophet Muhammad underlined the importance of the just wage by saying, 'give the employee his wages before his sweat has had time to dry'².

Near the end of the Bible there is short letter written by James, who in tradition was the first head of the new Church in Jerusalem at the birth of Christianity. He talked about a dispute between workers who 'mowed the fields', and those who employed them. Their cries 'reached the ears of the Lord' and the wealth of their oppressors rotted away (James 5:2, 5:4).

In Australia, the statement by Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, inspired Justice H.B. Higgins in 1907 to make a landmark decision in relation to workers who made a particular type of mower of the field (Sunshine Harvesters). He said they should be paid a minimum wage sufficient to support a family 'in frugal comfort'³. That became one of the treasured planks of Australian social policy.

The common saying that we should 'work to live but not live to work' is true. There is no real 'wealth' created when there is no respect for those who work. We should all be living in a shared Commonwealth of Australia.

Some might say, 'All well and good, but what about the economy?' Sometimes we forget the true meaning of words. Originally the word 'economy' meant 'rules of the household' rather than the rules of a competitive, impersonal and sometimes immoral marketplace. The Uniting Church in Australia, the Christian denomination of which I am a member, believes that in God's household people are to be *safe, secure, cared for and valued*⁴.

I believe that all people of good will, whether they are people of faith or not, support the vision of dignified work for all. However, some voices in our great Australian household, that is our broader community, are seldom heard.

We take it for granted that when we go shopping in a large shopping centre we will be entering an environment that is well cared for. Unless we are involved in the cleaning industry we probably give little thought to those who make sure that we are walking into a clean environment.

Do cleaners feel 'safe, secure and valued' at their places of work? This important report tells us that, unfortunately this is often not the case. I hope that people of faith, and others who care about the wellbeing of cleaners, will be moved to action through hearing, sometimes for the first time, the cleaner's voice.

Elizabeth Wynhausen, a journalist and writer, wrote a book⁵ arising from her experiences of living on the minimum wage for a number of months. She describes working as a cleaner in an office building and asking about her lost glasses:

"I lost my glasses the other night – I wonder if anyone saw them?"

"I had to say it again before they realised I was addressing them. Then one said no, he hadn't, sorry; and one shook his head.

"Of course I'm not sure where I lost them'. I said chattily. Silence.

"There were those who acknowledged with a kind word or two that a cleaner had skittered in, but most just went on with their work. People who do the job for real, such as school cleaners, said when I asked them that the lack of acknowledgement bothers them more than any other aspect of the work."

When calling for justice for cleaners we are reminded justice begins with listening with respect to her (or his) story. One cleaner alone might not be heard. It is difficult to ignore a 'United Voice' — what a great name for a union!

Some years back United Voice came to the Uniting Church Synod Justice and International Mission (JIM) Unit to talk about a community campaign called Clean Start: Fair Deal for Cleaners. Over the years JIM has supported cleaners at rallies and United Voice has assisted us to help raise awareness in our faith communities. Our Creative Ministries Network has been working for many years on issues for vulnerable workers, particularly in areas such as health and safety.

I am so pleased that these relationships have borne fruit and that we have put together this important publication that starts with the voice of a cleaner, Jackie, who simply needs more money to pay her bills and have a holiday once in a while, as well as feel more secure when she retires. We can all relate to these basic human needs, but many engaged in higher paid work have nothing like the level of stress that Jackie experiences to just make ends meet.

The Uniting Church in Australia seeks to work with those of faith, and none, to augment the voice of those who strive for justice in their working lives.

Isabel Thomas Dobson

Moderator

Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Uniting Church in Australia

September 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

— **80% of cleaners believe that their wage is inadequate to properly support a family.**

- › **78% of cleaners view holidays as an unaffordable luxury.**
- › **63% of cleaners supporting children have trouble paying for groceries.**
- › **54% of cleaners don't have enough time to clean properly.**
- › **49% of cleaners are stressed about their workload.**

Every Victorian shopping centre relies on the dedication and skills of its cleaners for a clean and healthy shopping and working environment. But the cleaners who do the hard work are being squeezed and exploited as shopping centre owners/managers and contract cleaning companies continue to cut corners with their cleaning budgets.

This report begins and ends with two central affirmations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam about human lives and God's intention for human society. The report begins with these religions' shared belief that all people are equal in the eyes of God, and ends with the conviction that society is to be organised according to justice.

However, for Victorian shopping centre cleaners, there is between these two affirmations, a different reality, which is described through a phone survey of 380 shopping centre cleaners. The cleaners' reality is tainted by the history of how shopping centre cleaning has been restructured through the privatisation and contracting processes that took place in the 1980s in Western economies. The result is a shopping centre contract cleaning system founded on the deepening injustice of continual cost-cutting of cleaners' pay and the erosion of their working conditions.

A system of labour that cuts corners on workers' rights to dignity and justice at work was first condemned in Christian social teaching in 1891, with an encyclical statement by Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 'on the condition of the working classes'. This 19th Century wisdom of the Church provides a measure for shopping centre owners and cleaning companies performance, and too often they are found wanting.

The key violations borne by shopping centre cleaners constitute a litany of injustices, from low rates of pay, pay that is not commensurate with their responsibilities, underpayment, unpaid overtime, poor record keeping that is disrespectful of employees' entitlements, to conflict over pay.

The work environment also contributes to the oppressive burden for cleaners, with cleaners identifying:

- › areas too large to clean,
- › staff shortages contributing to excessive workloads,
- › being required to fit in extra jobs with no extra time,
- › not having the right cleaning chemicals,
- › being given inadequate equipment,
- › being required to work through breaks,


all contributing to work that is performed under pressure. Such work systems 'grind men and women down with excessive labour, as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies.'

One harmful consequence of unjust work practices is the high level of stress that cleaners experience. Survey participants are in accord with occupational health and safety research that links work stress to heart disease, family breakdown, mental illness, and musculoskeletal injuries. The report also identifies a range of family impacts arising from the cleaning industry standard of below-poverty-line pay rates, such as trouble paying for groceries, being unable to afford holidays, difficulty with accommodation, transport and medical costs, and not being able to afford a house.

Cleaners also identify the impact of the industry contracting practice of cutting corners on their labour costs on public health and safety in shopping centres. Is the industry approaching a point where cost-cutting by contractors will leave the shopping centre owners/managers exposed to a public health and safety risk?

This report is sustained by a vision of the common good and a commitment to justice for all. The future of good shopping centre cleaning jobs is interwoven with the sustainability of the centres themselves.

This report calls for respect for the vital work that cleaners do, for fair remuneration and for just working conditions. On the matter of justice as the foundation of God's vision for the human community, the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all agree — justice is integral. This is the foundation on which we call the shopping centre owners/managers and the cleaning industry to base their commitment for the future.



“It doesn’t feel good that your kids have to help. But if they didn’t, I’d lose everything. That’s what it comes down to.”

CASE STUDY:

**JACKIE PETTS, CLEANER,
WESTFIELD DONCASTER**

“Everything goes up, but our wages don’t. By the time I pay my car and my mortgage, my whole week’s pay is gone. Sometimes I don’t even have enough. I’m actually behind in my mortgage at the moment. I don’t know how many years it is since I’ve had a holiday.”

“It’s been hard for me since my husband died. We were fine when he was alive,

but the last seven years have been very hard. Why? Because our wages aren’t high enough.

“I live with my daughter. She supports me, believe it or not. My money’s gone after I pay the mortgage and car. She pays the water, the rates, the gas, the power, the food – everything. It’s hard for me because my daughter is engaged. She’s been engaged

for seven years but because I’m in that situation she won’t get married for quite a while. It doesn’t feel good that your kids have to help. But if they didn’t, I’d lose everything. That’s what it comes down to.

“Retirement does worry me. I’ve only got four years to go. I won’t have anywhere near enough saved up.

“I’ve got a huge area to clean. So, you’re running from one end of the shopping centre to the other. It is just not possible to do a good job with the number of cleaners provided.

“Winning the Clean Start campaign will change my life, because it will mean fairer workloads and an extra \$6-8000 a year. You can do a lot with that money.”



1

INTRODUCTION

— Cleaners in retail shopping centres in Victoria are unfairly bearing the brunt of economic competition amongst retail property owners, property tenants and cleaning companies.



Cleaners in retail shopping centres in Victoria are unfairly bearing the brunt of economic competition amongst retail property owners, property tenants and cleaning companies.

This report documents the impact of the demands for increased workforce flexibility on the workers themselves. The report also illustrates how the unfairness borne by cleaners has serious consequences for public safety and the economic security of the retail sector.

The reality of unfair work conditions and their consequences find their genesis in the privatisation and contracting processes that took root in the 1980s in Western economies. Cleaners that used to be employed in-house by retail organisations on the award are now predominantly employed by cleaning contractors one or two steps removed from the retail property owners or retail tenants who set the cleaning contract terms.

The result is competitive cut-price contracting between cleaning contractors, and the proliferation of unfair contracting arrangements that shift the burden of economic progress on to those least able to oppose such injustice. This pattern of cleaning work in retail shopping centres today is as likely to be found in Canada, the US, or the UK as in Melbourne, Victoria.

These present injustices described by cleaners in Victorian shopping centres are now mirrored around the world. Cleaners from Melbourne to Florida are subject to similar cost-cutting labour measures, including low pay, compressed work schedules and high work intensity.⁶

But this is not the way work is meant to be.

As a Christian agency, Creative Ministries Network shares with Islam and Judaism a fundamental belief in the equality of all people in the eyes of God. This belief underpins the way work is meant to be for all people. The religious teachings of the major religions emphasise the importance of social solidarity and the struggle for justice when the values of the global economy lead to social injustice.⁷

This report begins with a picture of the dignity of cleaning work and the human dignity cleaners bring to their work. The report then describes the processes by which retail shopping centres are violating the dignity of cleaners and their work of cleaning. The impact of this violation is felt by those interviewed for this report through low pay, cost-cutting, and work intensification. The report describes these impacts and discusses their consequences for cleaners, their families, the shopping centre owners and tenants, and the public, before identifying the critical issues for a better future for cleaning at retail shopping centres.



2

**THE DIGNITY OF
CLEANING WORK AND
THE HUMAN DIGNITY
CLEANERS BRING TO
THEIR WORK**

*"We serve the community.
We make the shopping centres
pleasant for families, the elderly,
retail workers and managers."
— Francisco, cleaner.*



— ***Human dignity is intrinsic to each person in that it is given through birth. Each person brings their human dignity to their work.***

METHODOLOGY

This report's picture of cleaning work and the cleaners who carry it out draws on a telephone survey of 380 cleaners working in Victorian shopping centre. The project was designed by Creative Ministries Network (CMN) and United Voice, the cleaners union. CMN is a community services and research agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, specialising in how Christian social ethics informs justice and human dignity at work.

The survey was conducted by staff of United Voice from April to August 2011. Survey results were analysed and this report was prepared by Creative Ministries Network. The survey questioned cleaners about their personal lives and their work. The cleaners also expanded on their answers to reveal how they felt about their circumstances and their jobs. A focus group with five cleaners held in June 2011 provided more in-depth information on the people and their work. Additional interviews were held with several supervisors.

With the exception of the case study sections, the names of cleaners quoted in this report have been changed to protect their identities.

SHOPPING CENTRE CLEANERS: WHO THEY ARE

People with human dignity

Human dignity is intrinsic to each person in that it is given through birth. Each person brings their human dignity to their work. The human dignity of cleaners may be seen in the respect they have for themselves and each other.

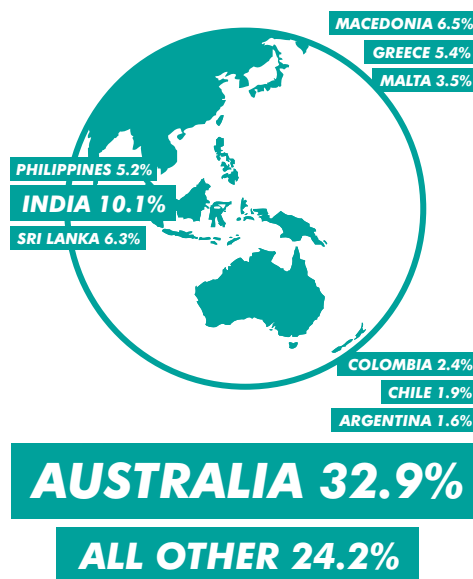
Cleaners in the survey talk about how respect is shown for their human dignity when their wages cover essentials like children's expenses, when their wages allows them to meet daily living expenses, and to save for personal and family needs like a car, perhaps a house, and a holiday. Cleaners say respect is given to their human dignity when their employer honours their employment agreement, for example, they are paid fairly for hours worked, their employer keeps proper records of cleaners' hours and pay, and they are given the training, equipment, safety gear, and cleaning chemicals to do their job properly.

Cleaners know their human dignity is respected when they have enough hours to do their work well, and they can meet the need for carrying out additional work without their willingness to help their employer being exploited. Respect may also be shown cleaners in the relationships that construct their work environment — with each other, supervisors, shopping centre management and the public. Human dignity is revealed in fairness and respect; truths the cleaners interviewed for this survey are very articulate about.

Workforce snapshot

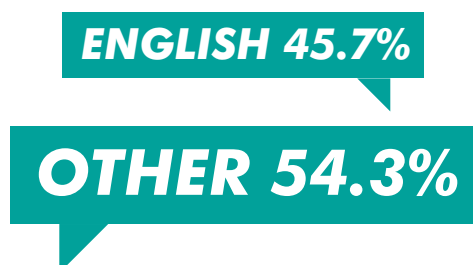
- › Almost half of shopping centre cleaners are aged over fifty.
- › Two-thirds are aged 40 years or older.
- › Over half (56%) are female.
- › Two thirds are either married or in a de facto relationship, and 43% are supporting children.
- › Over half (54%) speak a language other than English at home.
- › Two-thirds are overseas-born.
- › The largest overseas born group are from India (10%), followed by Macedonia (6.5%), Sri Lanka (6.3%) Greece (5.5%) and the Philippines (5.2%). The cleaners come from 44 different countries.
- › The most often spoken languages at home other than English are Spanish, Macedonian, Hindi, Greek and Arabic. Close to 40 different languages are spoken at home.
- › 12 per cent are students, with the majority international students.

**FIGURE 1:
CLEANERS' COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**



— **Two thirds of cleaners either married or in a de facto relationship and 43% are supporting children.**

**FIGURE 2:
LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME**



SHOPPING CENTRE CLEANING: WHAT CLEANERS DO

The dignity of shopping centre cleaning work

Work has its own dignity, given in its contribution to the common good. Shopping centre cleaning work is responsible for keeping shopping centres clean, safe, and looking attractive and inviting for the general public. This work is vital for the health and safety of customers and staff, and for ensuring the integrity of the environment in which the various businesses in the centres are able to operate. “We are responsible for public health and safety and the presentation of the shopping centre,” said Flavio.⁸

Shopping centre cleaning work also contributes to the common good by providing meaningful work for cleaners. The meaning of work may be found in the tasks involved:

“This job is very hard but I am happy, I think it is a good job.”

“People appreciate what we do. They say ‘thank you for doing a good job’.”

“We serve the community. We make the shopping centres pleasant for families, the elderly, retail workers and managers.”

The meaning of work may also be found in the relationships it sustains:

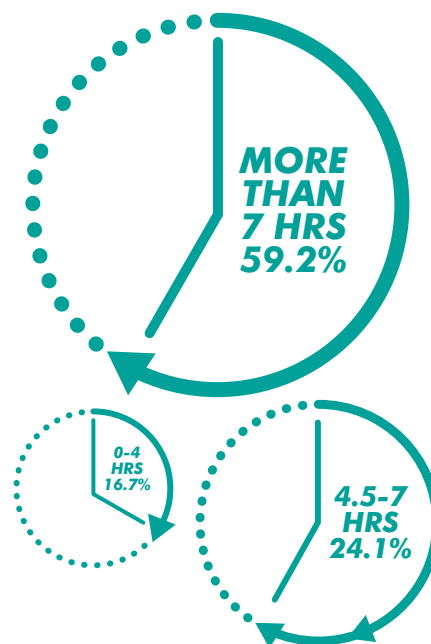
“I love my job. I meet lots of people in all walks of life.”

“The reason I’m here is because I’ve met some great people. I’ve never had such good people with me before. One of the reasons I stayed was the people I met there, and hopefully I can give them back some of what they’ve given me in the last four or five years, because what I got from these people, it’s invaluable. I just cherish it and I will cherish it all my life.”

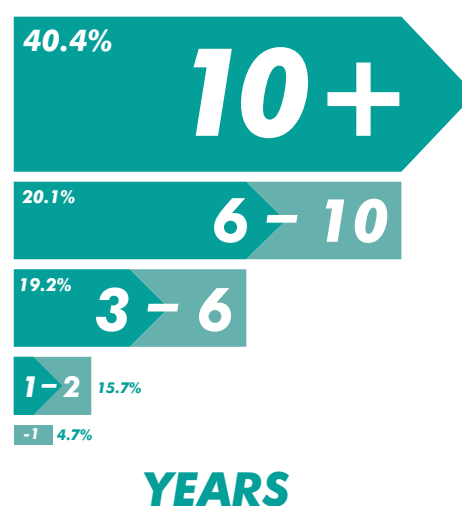
A snapshot of cleaners’ work

- › Over half (55%) work day shifts and 22% work at night. The remainder either work afternoons (7%), or have varied hours (16%).
- › Over half (52%) are full-time, 43% are part-timers and 5% are casual cleaners.
- › Almost 60 per cent worked for 7.5 hours or more per day (see figure 3).
- › Many cleaners are very experienced. About 60 per cent have worked in the industry more than five years, while almost 15 per cent for 20 years or more (see figure 4).

**FIGURE 3:
HOURS PER DAY NORMALLY WORKED**



**FIGURE 4:
NUMBER OF YEARS WORKED
IN THE CLEANING INDUSTRY**



Who cleaners work for

The cleaners surveyed currently work for 17 different contract cleaning companies. One third (33%) work for Spotless, followed by Swan (16%), SecureClean (14%), AssetLink (10%), Millennium (9%) and the rest worked for the 12 other companies. That is, almost half (49%) those surveyed worked for two cleaning companies, and four out of five cleaners (82%) worked for the five companies listed.

However, cleaners interviewed for this study work at 70 different shopping centres across metropolitan and regional Victoria, owned by a number of major retail and property companies. So who owns Victoria's shopping centres? The Commonwealth Bank (16%) and Centro Properties Group (16%) each own 11 centres, Myer (14%) owns 10 centres and ISPT (9%) own six centres, that is, these four companies own over half (55%) of the shopping centres, in this survey.⁹

There is dignity in cleaning work and human dignity inherent in the people who do this work. Sadly, the results of this research show that in too many instances, this is not the experience of shopping centre cleaners. Rather, it emerges that the dignity of cleaners and their work of cleaning are violated by a systematic pattern of injustices. We turn now to describe how this has come about.

— **The cleaners surveyed currently work for 17 different contract cleaning companies.**



“If you have to do a second job to survive, you can’t look after your family, you can’t look after your kids, you can’t enjoy life.”

CASE STUDY:

GAMAL BABIKER, CLEANER,

CHADSTONE, THE FASHION CAPITAL

“Most of the cleaners who work with me, they do a second job to cover their living costs — especially if they have a mortgage or have many kids. Some of them work full time, plus 20 hours. That’s 60 hours a week. This is not fair.”

“If you have to do a second job to survive, you can’t look after your family, you can’t look after your kids, you can’t enjoy life. Without weekend shifts, I can’t survive.

I do a lot of overtime. Anytime they ask me to work I go, because I need the money.

“I used to go fishing. I used to go to community meetings. I stopped doing that. I am tired because most of the time I’m doing overtime.

“Even so, 25 percent of my income goes to tax, 25 percent goes to rent. I have a car loan, credit card, and I have to support my son.

Sometimes when I get paid, there is just \$20 or \$50 left. My daughter helps me and I have to let her help.

“When I started here 12 years ago I was a car-park sweeper. You had two car park sweepers: one in east, another in the west. And now they have gone from 6000 car parking space to 9000 and there is just one person.

“When we win our Clean Start campaign, I will feel

happy. We will get respect, we will get better pay and we will get to enjoy life, like other workers in this country.

“If we didn’t clean the shopping centre, there would be disease, a lot of problems. People don’t understand that cleaners are crucial. When we win, we’re going to feel like we are part of public health. We are not ‘just a cleaner’, like they say now.”



3

*“With every contract that changed over, the prices were put down, thus the hours went down but without decreasing the workload.”
— Jimmy, cleaner.*

**THE TAINTED HISTORY
OF RESTRUCTURING
CLEANING: VIOLATING
THE DIGNITY OF
CLEANERS AND
CLEANING WORK**



A RACE TO THE BOTTOM

With only 15% of cleaners working in the industry for 20 years or more, the economic process by which shopping centre owners and managers frame cleaning contracts and work conditions remains largely hidden to cleaners and the community.

Gavin, a cleaner with over 30 years of experience, explains the change that has reshaped the cleaning industry from when he began cleaning. He was employed with a newspaper, cleaning their offices, then employed by a hospital. “The cleaning was terrific. We had time to do everything without stress.” Now because the property owners outsource the cleaning to cleaning contractors, Gavin says the cleaning companies are “cutting corners to make a profit and we have to rush and do twice as much work. When working for the companies directly it was easier and you had security and you were a colleague not a number.”

Researchers agree that the process Gavin described began when the shopping centre owners/managers privatised and contracted-out cleaning work. This gave rise to and then shaped the contract cleaning industry.

“In the past, cleaning was generally done by direct (‘in-house’) employees of the building’s owner/manager, but nowadays the work is more often outsourced to a specialist company that supplies cleaning services on a contract basis. The owner/manager of the premises releases a tender document, with specifications of the services required (including tasks, methods, and preferred hours of cleaning) and contract cleaning companies compete to win the tender. The competition is often fierce and the successful bidder will usually be the one offering the lowest price.”¹⁰

Cutting here, cutting there

Campbell and Peeters note that labour costs are responsible for an estimated average of 70 per cent of total contract cleaning expenses.¹¹ The result of this for many cleaners is as David observed, “The company quoted so cheaply to win the contracts, then cut it to pieces by not giving the right amount of time to get the job done. The pressure was put on all the good people.” Jimmy agreed. “With every contract that changed over, the prices were put down, thus the hours went down but without decreasing the workload.”

The more contract cleaning companies compete within the narrow economic parameters of the shopping centre owners cleaning tenders, the more they contribute to the ever increasing pressures on their staff.

So, many cleaners who have worked at the same shopping centre for a number of years have worked for a number of different cleaning contract companies in that time. Typically, when a property owner/manager changes a contract from one cleaning company to another, it is due to a lower contract price. The cleaners stay at the site by transferring to the new contractor.

One consequence of this situation is described by Margaret. “When the new contractors took over the contract, I lost my accrued leave and lost some night time penalty rates.” Similarly Grace says, “They underquoted everything when they bought the shopping centre contract, so they are covering those expenses by reducing our pay.”

For Winsome it was being forced to change shifts. “I was always nights but then they made me change over to days and my pay went down to \$1,400 a fortnight. But I didn’t want to work days.” For Tanya, a new contractor meant increased work pressures. “They want the job to be done in the same time. I used to start at 5 o’clock, but now I start at 6 o’clock, and they want me to do the same work and finish at the same time.”

The structure of the shopping centre cleaning industry now has a globalised practice of avoiding minimum labour standards, labour cost-cutting, and increased workloads to protect and enhance the profits of property owners/managers and cleaning contractors.¹²

An unfortunate precedent

It is the systematic nature of these practices that have tainted the shopping centre cleaning industry with injustices against cleaners reminiscent of the late 19th century, when the Church first voiced its opposition to the conditions endured by workers at that time. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII condemned the unrestrained power of market forces on working conditions, saying,

“working men (and women) have been surrendered, isolated and helpless to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. ... a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon ... the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.”¹³

Since 1891, the Church has regarded imposing conditions ‘little better than slavery’ on working people as a violation of their human dignity. Such practices were condemned as ‘shameful and inhuman’, an offence against divine justice. This is the measure against which the cleaning industry’s systems for employing shopping centre cleaners will now be considered.





4

***“We are short every payment.
I never get paid holiday pay.
I can’t pay my bills because I am
always missing money in my pay.”
— Slavka, cleaner.***

**THE IMPACT OF
SHOPPING CENTRE
CLEANING INDUSTRY
PRACTICES ON CLEANERS
AND THEIR WORK**

KEY VIOLATIONS

- › Low rates of pay
- › Pay not commensurate with responsibility
- › Underpayment
- › Unpaid overtime
- › Poor record keeping
- › Conflict over pay
- › Areas too large to clean
- › Staff shortages
- › Required to fit in extra jobs
- › Not having the right cleaning chemicals
- › Inadequate equipment
- › Required to work through breaks
- › Required to work unpaid overtime
- › Working under pressure

PAY ISSUES

The pay for a level one cleaning service employee, the level at which most shopping centre cleaners are employed, is \$629.50 per week, according to the Cleaning Services Award (2010). This is significantly lower than the updated poverty line for 2011, which, “inclusive of housing costs, ... is \$835.30 per week for a family comprising two adults, one of whom is working, and two dependent children.”¹⁴

Shopping centre cleaners carry a burden of personal and family costs due to wage levels below the poverty line. Even cleaners employed at level 2 (\$651.30 per week) and level 3 (\$686.20) do not earn enough to escape the pressure of below-poverty-line incomes.

Some cleaners who entered the industry on low rates of pay have found even those rates of pay squeezed by the contract cleaning system. Many cleaners experienced ongoing hassles with underpayment, incorrect pay, refusal of payment for overtime worked, and inadequate record keeping of their pay entitlements. The following litany of grievances voices cleaners’ deep feelings of violation at the unfairness they experience around their pay issues.

— Shopping centre cleaners carry a burden of personal and family costs due to wage levels below the poverty line.

Pay not commensurate with responsibility

A number of cleaners said their pay does not reflect the importance of their work, especially given the difficult and often unpleasant nature of their work.

“We should get more for what we do, especially what you have to clean up in the toilets.”

“It is hard work cleaning, being on your feet all the time and you get a sore back, mopping and lifting all day. People don’t realise how much we do, we don’t just walk around all day pushing a broom. We have to empty bins full of food and drink and they are messy and heavy.”

“All I’ve ever known is cleaning and it just keeps getting harder and harder. I just hope that whoever this is going to knows that without cleaners nothing gets done and we deserve to get paid more for what we do.”

Underpayment and conflict over pay issues

Complaints about being underpaid were a consistent theme, for example:

“We are short every payment. I never get paid holiday pay. I can’t pay my bills because I am always missing money in my pay.”

“Every now and then you find that money is missing from your pay cheque. I was owed 22.5 hours.”

“Every fortnight there would be issues, always underpayments. They kept saying they had no one to replace me so I couldn’t take leave.”

“My wage has actually dropped from \$18 to \$16 an hour when the contractor changed four years ago.”

“Payroll two weeks ago made a mistake with my pay. I was not paid for four hours of my work. However this still has not been fixed.”

Over time, the impact of cutting labour costs can lead to deteriorating relationships between cleaners and their cleaning company, particularly when exacerbated by penny-pinching attitudes towards cleaners’ conditions of employment, and incompetent record-keeping. Cleaners commented:

“We are always fighting with our payment every single pay period.”

“They say we have to fax them our pay slips and they’ll take care of it and they never do.”

“If I query pay I get punished, I have to do extra work and they cut my pay. If I take a sick day I don’t get paid sick leave.”

"I put in a complaint and got paid 10-12 hours, but am still owed 10 hours. They give no explanation and tried to say that I was paid."

"I worked up to seven days a week. I was with them for 14 months without a day off. I always had endless problems with payments. They always came up with ridiculous reasons, and the disputes could go on for months."

"The cleaning company is so stingy with the money. They're all about profits."

"It's frustrating. They don't tell us anything like how many days holiday or sick leave we have."

"My employer took seven weeks to pay me my last pay."

Unpaid overtime

Over half (53%) the cleaners surveyed said they had worked overtime, and of these less than half (46%) were paid for the times they stay back or come in early on their shift. That is, more people (54%) were not paid for their "overtime". Some are never paid, even if they are specifically called in early or asked to stay back by their supervisor or manager. Adam used to regularly work back for up to 30 minutes, but refuses to do so anymore because he has not been paid for this work.

Others commented:

"We have a lot of issues in regards to not getting shift allowance and overtime allowance and our super has been not paid properly."

"Bosses know that I work overtime but I won't get paid. The time is fixed."

"I thought that's what I have to do."

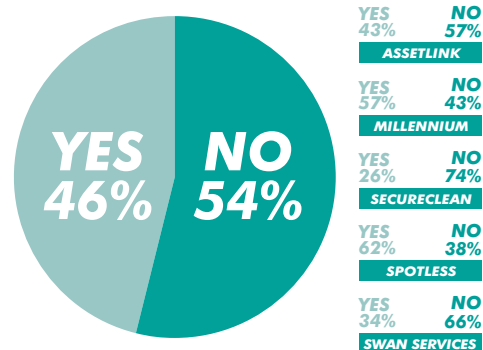
"I stay back an extra 15 minutes or so to make my area safe for the next shift. I don't document it or claim it, as I have enough trouble trying to get paid my normal hours."

Hani, who regularly works 30 minutes past his finish time, said "I have been paid for it once. I've given up telling them I work longer than I should, and I only take about 20 minutes for a meal break instead of 1 hour. But I take pride in my work and don't leave till I am happy with what I have done. On Saturday and Sunday I choose to come in an hour early each day and start to make sure that everything is cleaned properly. I put the hours on my sign-in and out, but they don't pay me the extra hours, but I have never asked or queried it."

Some supervisors will not allow their cleaners to work additional time when they know the staff will not be paid. The pressure to work unpaid overtime can affect supervisors as well. Monika is a full-time working supervisor on \$37,000 and has never been paid for the additional hours she works — usually over an hour every day. Sometimes she doesn't take breaks, or she does her paperwork in her breaks. "I have to get the work done - I have to stay back — that's my work ethic. I don't want an overload tomorrow, so I do it today."

A supervisor said, "I work full time on the floor cleaning and I don't have any time allocated to do paper work so I have to do it on my breaks or after work — that's why I stay back all the time. I should have time allowed to do supervisor work and have my work-load reduced."

**FIGURE 5:
ARE YOU ALWAYS PAID FOR OVERTIME?**



"I choose to come in an hour early and start to make sure that everything is cleaned properly. I put the hours on my sign-in and out, but they don't pay me the extra hours."
— Hani, cleaner.

Church condemns underpayment of workers

The standard the Church raised in the late 19th century to condemn the unregulated demands of capital on working people still has a strong resonance with the violation of human dignity and the dignity of cleaning work in these practices of shopping centre owners/managers and their contracted cleaning companies. Leo XIII's century-old admonishment of employers about inadequate pay for the labourers' due is sadly very contemporary. The Pope counsels employers against cutting workers wages as a cost saving practice, saying that their

*"great and principal duty is to give everyone what is just. ... to gather one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine. To defraud any one of wages that are his due is a great crime which cries to the avenging anger of Heaven. ... Lastly, the rich must religiously refrain from cutting down the workmen's earnings, whether by force, by fraud, or by usurious dealing."*⁵

The Church condemned employment practices where fear of unemployment meant "the workman (and woman) accept harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice."⁶

Today, a number of cleaners have joined their voices to this papal opposition to the injustice of imposing job insecurity on vulnerable workers. Brian said, "I've been doing this job here for 10 years and every two or three years the contract changes. Why do I need to be on probation for three months when I have been doing the same work for 10 years?"

Marie protested the use of short-term contract employment to avoid redundancy payments, saying, "My husband got made redundant from here. He was a night cleaner. They called him in and fired him. If you work for less than one year they don't need to pay you redundancy pay."

From 1891, Christian teaching has affirmed the importance of workers joining together in trade unions for 'mutual help'. Pope Leo XIII affirmed the importance of 'working men's associations' organising to help "each individual member to better his condition to the utmost in body, soul, and property."⁷ Justice is both a spiritual, social and material condition, a truth well-recognised by those surveyed.

A number of cleaners commented on how much they appreciated the support of their union, particularly on issues such as fixing underpayments. Miranda said, "The union is doing a wonderful job and it's needed." Tim added, "In the beginning of the year the company weren't paying me properly, but I contacted the union and now they are paying me properly all the time." Julie said, "I am extremely happy and overjoyed with my union organiser. We feel that someone has finally listened and can answer our questions and concerns that we have."

COMPRESSED WORK SCHEDULES AND WORK INTENSIFICATION

Cleaning industry work schedules are often bound up with short and irregular hours of employment. "The working-time of cleaners tends to be pressed into tight schedules, with a limited 'package' of paid hours attached to each 'job'," write Campbell and Peeters.¹⁸

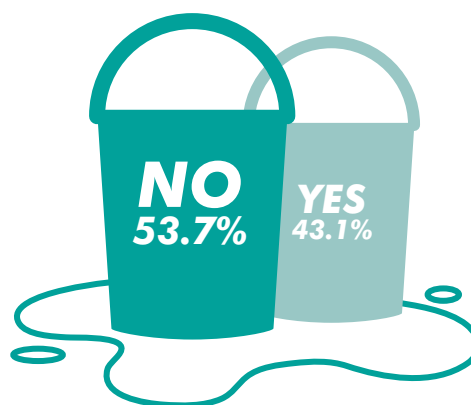
A majority of cleaners (54%) believed they didn't always have enough time to clean properly. At some companies, 55 per cent and even 65 per cent of those cleaners surveyed said they did not have enough time to get their job done properly.

There can be many reasons why cleaners experience having too much work to do in the time allocated to do their job properly. These include being required to clean areas that are too large to clean in the time allocated, experiencing persistent staff shortages, and being required to do extra work beyond the scheduled tasks.

Work schedules in cleaning are particularly linked to work tasks and workloads. Typically, the employer links a set of cleaning tasks, cleaning standards, and a time allocation for the job, write Campbell and Peeters:

*"The job comes with explicit workloads and norms of performance. These norms incorporate a dimension of quality but they are mainly to do with work effort, obliging workers to clean a specific ... space within an allotted time. The short hours attached to the job function primarily as a constraint that serves to mould a high work effort. This in turn reduces the need for direct control of the worker and allows supervision to focus on monitoring quality rather than work effort."*⁹

**FIGURE 6:
ENOUGH TIME TO CLEAN PROPERLY?**



Too large an area to clean

A common refrain from cleaners was they felt unable to cope with their ever-expanding workloads.

“The area is actually TOO BIG. I can’t run across the mall because it is an OHS risk”

“Night shift toilet-cleaning includes five toilet blocks in eight hours.”

“The area to cover is bigger since the shopping centre expanded.”

Staff shortages

Many cleaners also felt that — especially at peak times — contractors did not put on enough staff to meet the additional workload.

“During the Christmas holidays it was very busy and my ability to finish work on time varied considerably. During these times not enough cleaners were on, the finishing times of other cleaners meant jobs were always being passed on when they were not finished.”

“Over holidays and Christmas we don’t get extra staff anymore, we used to get more cleaners in over the busy times, but they don’t hire anymore now and it’s harder over the holidays.”

“There’s a lot of stainless steel, it’s time consuming. It is impossible to do it all with one full-time and one part time cleaner.”

“Lack of staff is always an issue so that we can’t do our job well, especially during busy times.”

Being asked to do extra jobs

Cleaners felt deeply frustrated that, as extra jobs were piled on top of them, they were expected to do the impossible.

“Busy times make it harder and when there are emergencies we have to stop what we are doing and go clean up the emergency, then we have to go back to our site and there is a bigger mess there.”

“You’re working somewhere, and get an urgent call to go elsewhere. I can’t finish a job without being called multiple times. I am expected to attend a spill call in two minutes. It’s not possible.”

“They give us more work to do all the time, so we can’t do it properly.”

“Centre Management have bought in 20 minute rotations for work areas, so we get less time to do the same amount of work.”

“I now have three times more to do than what I had to do seven years ago, but in the same time! I am doing the work of three people.”

— A majority of cleaners (54%) believed they didn’t always have enough time to clean properly.

Not having the right cleaning chemicals

The correct cleaning chemicals and products are essential for cleaners to be able to do their job quickly and efficiently. Cleaners rely on supervisors and managers to provide cleaning chemicals and most cleaners feel they have the right chemicals they need to clean properly at their centre.

However some cleaners have had problems with chemicals. Sometimes cleaning chemicals run out and management does not order them in immediately, or there are delivery delays. So cleaners resort to using only hot or cold water or hand soap as an alternative, or use an incorrect chemical to do the job. Barry said, “At times I was scraping chemicals from bottles while waiting for chemicals to be ordered; that would at times take weeks and so I would use hot water instead of the right chemicals.”

Sometimes the shortage is rectified quickly, but a cleaner at one major shopping centre reported being out of the correct cleaning product for weeks.

Some cleaners have noticed that their cleaning chemicals have been watered down to make them last longer, or inferior products are provided because they are cheaper. Nell reported, “The disinfectant was taken away as it was too expensive and so as a replacement there was something cheaper and not as good. I made a written complaint and had no response. They took away the most important cleaning product.” This situation makes cleaning more difficult, time-consuming and stressful because cleaners cannot do the job to the required standard.

Sometimes these already low-paid cleaners simply buy cleaning products with their own money or “sneak them in” so they can do their job properly. For example:

“For the first couple of months when the new company took over, we had to buy our own chemicals, gloves, uniforms, and mops.”

“Once I had no chemicals at all and I asked my supervisor for money and went to the shops and actually bought the chemicals. My supervisor was not happy with that at all, but I didn’t care.”

“There are a lot of times that we have to buy our own detergent to clean tables. For the first few months we had to pay for all of our supplies.”

Several cleaners said that graffiti is particularly difficult to clean with the chemicals they are supplied with. Others were concerned when chemicals used in cleaning were not clearly identified. Vinay said, “Some bottles have no chemical identification, there are safety issues. Sometimes they don’t know what is in the bottle. They have no training on chemical use.”

“I have to use the mop to plunge the toilets; I feel it’s a plumber’s job and an OHS risk. I have to use the handle to unblock toilets.”
— Julie, cleaner.

Not having the right equipment

In order to do a good job in the time available, the right cleaning equipment in good working order is essential. Most cleaners (79%) said they are provided with the right equipment to clean properly at their centre. This could mean correct colour-coding for cleaning gear for particular areas, machinery serviced or changed-over regularly and new equipment provided. One cleaner said, “we just ask and they give it to us”.

The cleaning contract companies who do cut corners on equipment cause their cleaners to waste time and can lead to frustration and work injury. Cleaners who have experienced problems with equipment criticised the following problems:

- › equipment shortages.
- › having to share equipment which was not always left accessible and in good condition.
- › lack of success in having management fix equipment in a timely manner.
- › working with old or worn-out equipment that did not do a good job.
- › having to do work manually when a machine is broken.
- › having to improvise. Julie had resorted to using mops to unblock toilets because she didn’t have the correct equipment.
- › lack of procedure on what to do when equipment breaks down.

Andy summed up the frustration, “It’s total crap. I have sticky-taped things together. Broken dustpans are not replaced. Fringe mops never cleaned. The wrong cloth for certain areas. No safety wet signs, not ordered. No protective masks.”

A number of cleaners used their own time and money to fix these problems so they could do their job properly. For example:

“I have to use the mop to plunge the toilets; I feel it’s a plumber’s job and an OHS risk. I have to use the handle to unblock toilets. No cloths, and problems with shift crossover finding equipment that has been borrowed. Cuts into time we don’t have.”

“There were never enough dust pans, and I was sick of asking for them from my supervisor so I would bring in my own.”

“(Machine) was never working properly, so I would come in and fix the equipment every time 30 mins before the shift started. I would bring in my own tools and would fix the equipment otherwise without them I was not able to complete my job in time.”

“Always we have to improvise, or ask somebody. The cloths are too small to use, I have to bring the cloths home and wash them or bring some of my own to get the job done.”

Working under pressure

Many of those surveyed made sure the researchers heard of their grievances about working under pressure. Comments included:

“You have to work like a machine.”

“They blame us if we can’t finish on time because we take pride in the job. It’s high pressure. There just isn’t enough time to do it all. The manager checks if you do it properly AND if you get it all done.”

“I had to work very quickly because the time was very short for what we had to do.”

“So much to do, it frustrates me I can’t do a 100% perfect job — that’s why I feel under pressure.”

“Sometimes they asked us to do too much and it was really impossible. They wanted me to vacuum dust and clean the walls. They want it to look new every day and it is impossible, especially for one person.”

“I had to clean two kitchens and two floors (carpets vacuum and bathrooms). I was the only one assigned to two floors, and had to complete them in four hours!! It was very hard.”

“We always have to be somewhere else, it’s too much. You can’t do the food court, the bathrooms, all of it by yourself. It used to be two people.”

“They blame us if we can’t finish on time because we take pride in the job. It’s high pressure. There just isn’t enough time to do it all. The manager checks if you do it properly and if you get it all done.”
— Priyanka, cleaner.

Technology used to increase pressure on cleaners

Work intensity is also monitored in some centres through the introduction of technology that tracks cleaners’ work progress. A focus group participant described the use of “wands” in monitoring work performance. “A wand is a gadget that sends a signal to a receiver. The receiver responds and the wand records that signal. At the end of the shift, you take the wand back to the office, and the computer loads all the signals back into the system. Every time you’ve been under one of the receiver points, it counts as one visit to that area. The computer analyses the information and says, ‘Jim went through that point 60 times today. That was good, or it was only 30, it wasn’t very good.’ Every time you visit an area you have to tag the receiver, and again when you finish. The problem is that every time there is a really bad result, they say it’s your fault. They do it at Westfield, but it’s impossible to meet the rotations they set.”

This process is described as the reorganisation of cleaning work according to ‘scientific management’. The principle involved in the introduction of scientific management systems is “to further entrench management control and to eliminate workers ‘slack’ during work-time”.²⁰ Work is regulated by a computer program designed to specify the space and time allotted to clean a designated space.²¹

Cleaners have their own way of resisting or coping with compressed schedules and intensifying workloads. Cleaners will help each other in busy times. Brian said, “though we work hard we still help each other to get the job done.” Others mentioned the importance of teamwork.

Supervisors, a conduit for management pressure

Usually the work pressure on cleaners is communicated via their supervisor, although supervisors may be the meat in the sandwich in this industry. “Sometimes they get a bit angry from the pressure they have from senior management,” one cleaner noted. With cleaning contracts being so tight, supervisors can feel under pressure from management to save costs by leaning hard on their cleaning staff — for example coercing them to hurry to complete their work on time.

About one-quarter of cleaners reported problems with their supervisor. Vasanta illustrates the difficulties. “At times she is rude, threatens me with my job and scares me by telling me, ‘you have to be careful otherwise you can lose your job like what happened to you before’. I am fearful of losing my job again and the supervisor drums that in my head quite often. I feel trapped as an international student and just take the verbal threats from my supervisor.”

“At times she is rude, threatens me with my job and scares me.”
— Vasanta, cleaner.

Violating human dignity

So while cleaners act to maintain their dignity and the dignity of their work, the structure of modern shopping centre cleaning arrangements presses injustice upon them. From late in the 19th century, the Church has condemned the violation of workers’ dignity and the dignity of work. Leo XIII’s admonishments of 1891 work practices speak well to contemporary practices of compressed work schedules and high work intensity in shopping centre cleaning practices. The Pope affirms that “all men (and women) are equal ... No-one may with impunity outrage that human dignity which God Himself treats with great reverence.”²²

The Church’s social ethics speak directly to the shopping centre cleaning industry, declaring:

“...the first thing of all to secure is to save working people from the cruelty of men of greed, who use human beings as mere instruments for money-making. It is neither just nor human so to grind men (and women) down with excessive labour as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies.”²³



5

**CONSEQUENCES
FOR CLEANERS &
THEIR FAMILIES**

*“I have a notice from my bank.
They want to kick us out, because
we’re in arrears for two weeks! I can’t
afford to keep up with all the bills.”
— Josef, cleaner.*



“Workers put their powers at the disposal of the entrepreneurs, and these, following the principle of maximum profit, tried to establish the lowest possible wages for the work done by the employees. In addition there were other elements of exploitation, connected with the lack of safety at work and of safeguards regarding the health and living conditions of the workers and their families.”
— Pope John-Paul II²⁴

Christian social ethics teaches that when the dignity of human beings is violated by injustice, the whole created order suffers the bitter consequences of this violation. This is also the clear and disturbing picture that emerges from this research. The consequences of unjust work practices reach far beyond the impact on the workers themselves, rippling out from their suffering to their families, the public, and the contractors and shopping centres themselves.

CLEANERS’ HEALTH AND SAFETY

Work stress

Almost half the cleaners had felt stressed about their high workload. This is not surprising. The two most common measures of work stress identified in the work stress research literature — job strain and effort-reward imbalance — are strongly indicated by cleaners’ comments in Section Four of this report. Esler et al. write:

“The first (pattern of adverse work environment) is the ‘High Job Strain’ workplace, characterised by the lack of control over the pace of work and its targets and deadlines. The second is the ‘Effort-Reward Imbalanced’ workplace, typified by demanding work which causes little personal gratification.”²⁵

Cleaners gave clear indications through their frustrations and grievances over a range of pay issues that they are inadequately rewarded for the increasing effort required to cope with growing work pressures. Their experience of the job strain caused by the steadily increased pressure of compressed schedules and work intensification was also evident.

— The proportion of cleaners at some companies who had felt stressed about their workload was as high as 57%.

**FIGURE 7:
STRESSED ABOUT WORKLOAD**



Esler et al. are unequivocal about the risk posed by work stress. Acute mental stress is “a trigger for cardiac catastrophes (acute myocardial infarction, sudden death) ... is now firmly established.”²⁶

Barbara’s experience is illustrative: “I think that’s why I had a health scare and had to cut down my hours then finally resign from a heart problem.”

The proportion of cleaners at some companies who had felt stressed about their workload was as high as 57 per cent.

One likely indicator of effort-reward imbalance in this study is the issue of unpaid overtime, where 51 per cent of those surveyed reported they are not always paid for overtime when they work overtime to complete their job. However, 61 per cent of those who had unpaid overtime reported feeling stressed about their workload, while only 48 per cent of those who had paid overtime felt stressed about their workload. Unpaid overtime may be an occupational health and safety risk factor for work stress and a range of serious health issues.

Injustice contributes to heart disease

Recent research has identified a third risk factor at work for coronary heart disease. Justice at work, measured by employees’ belief their supervisor considers their viewpoints, shares information concerning decision-making, and treats individuals fairly and in a truthful manner, has been linked to the incidence of coronary heart disease, as Kivimake et al. write:

“A high level of justice at work was associated with lower job strain and a more favourable match between efforts and rewards. ... the level of justice remained an independent predictor of coronary heart disease risk after adjustment for (these) other psychosocial factors.”²⁷

This is also indicated by cleaners’ comments and from the wisdom of Christian social ethics.

Mary illustrates how stress builds when workers experience unjust relationships with their supervisor. Mary paid the medical costs of her workplace injury because she was afraid to go through WorkCover, fearing the company would use this to fire her.

Gracia conveys the stress of both her work schedule and the intensifying pressure in her workload. “Things change — we do different things during the day, toilets, floors, dusting, cleaning bins. It’s very hard for one person to do so many squares. They measure our work load by the square metre — car parks, entrances, bins and lids, glasses. I used to work in the food court and do many tables. The food court is a harder, heavier job, lifting plates and things but you don’t have finger marks on glass etc. like in the toilets and windows, where you could miss something. Sometimes we have to go from one end of the centre to the other and you have to run to go quickly. Because it’s dangerous, you can’t leave the hazard.”

Other cleaners echo Gracia’s stress. Kahn says, “Some days there is so much mess. Friday and Saturday, with vomit and urine and mess, sometimes there is so much I can’t clean it all in 4 hours, but sometimes it’s OK though.” Azhar, a supervisor said, “Three people used to take 22 hours and now two people in 15 do the same job. Someone who had three toilet areas now has four to clean in 7.6 hours. Each toilet area includes male, female and disabled toilets and a baby change room.”

Selene’s stress is the sum of high job strain, poor reward for her effort, and lack of justice in her relationship with her employer. She says, “They have new stuff for me to do in four hours now. I have to mop the corridor and toilet from yesterday. It’s extra work. They don’t have equipment like the mop and bucket provided up in the new area. The leading hand said to take it from the other end of the floor, but then it’s an OHS issue, taking a bucket with water all that way, especially when it’s busy. Then I am running behind in all my other duties too. The leading hand says she doesn’t know and doesn’t care when problems are brought up to her.”

— Mary paid the medical costs of her workplace injury because she was afraid to go through WorkCover, fearing the company would use this to fire her.

Work stress invades the home

Work stress has also been linked to family relationship concerns. It can lead to problems at home for many cleaners, including family tension and marriage breakdown. Nithi's family suffered when his stress spilled over into family life. "We went on holiday but I couldn't hold it back and had to let it out. My family suffered as they were all upset and sad as I couldn't handle the pressure." Similarly Gina said work stress caused her to lose sleep. "I was constantly venting to my husband and (this) was causing a bit of strain."

Ghalib considers stress from work "made my marriage break down, working such long hours and never being home — only to sleep." Sanju also reported how work contributed to the end of his marriage. "Stress affected me so greatly that I had to leave the industry as this was causing a lot of issues with my wife which led to my wife having left me and now I have three children in my care and I am unable to work."

Stress contributes to mental illness

Workers also identify how work stress has contributed to mental illness. Emma said, "It stresses me a lot and contributes towards my existing depression and I have had to cut my hours back primarily due to that." Similarly Vince found work stress undermined his mental wellbeing, saying, "They expect too much of workers and there's just too much work, I had a breakdown under the stress."

Judith witnessed a colleague's collapse at work. "Women are breaking down, I witness many women crying. One woman left in an ambulance last year. She collapsed because she was cleaning too many areas." Mary said she suffered from depression due to a previous supervisor.

Coping with work stress

Cleaners have identified a range of ways to cope with work stress. Some have cut back their working hours. Others made complaints to supervisors or managers about their impossible workloads. Sometimes a problem resolved itself with a new, more sympathetic supervisor. Other cleaners resist the pressure to stay back to finish a job.

One cleaner explained, "they don't pay me enough to stress — I just do what I can do. When I'm stressed, I let management know. I stand up and say what I need and then the supervisor brings what I need for me straight away." The role of supervisors in coping with work stress is very important for cleaners, many of whom were grateful their supervisor thought that breaks were important and would not let their staff sacrifice them.

Many supervisors, having once been cleaners themselves, understand the pressures of the job well and treat cleaners with consideration. Having an understanding and empathetic supervisor can go a long way to make a cleaner's job less stressful and more manageable. One cleaner with a good supervisor said "I am a very, very happy cleaner in my centre." Another cleaner said her supervisor is "lovely".

"Stress affected me so greatly that I had to leave the industry as this was causing a lot of issues with my wife, which caused her to leave me. Now I have three children in my care and I am unable to work."
— Sanju, cleaner.

Abuse and harassment of cleaners

While three-quarters of cleaners had not experienced rude or abusive behaviour from their supervisor, any level of abuse is an injustice that may contribute to work stress and poor occupational health outcomes.

However, almost one-quarter of cleaners have experienced rude or abusive behaviour from their supervisor or from a manager. Several cleaners put this behaviour down to their supervisor's or manager's "moods" or poor communication skills.

Whilst some cleaners experience the occasional unpleasant incident or outburst of bad temper, others suffer on-going harassment. Sometimes the behaviour is blatant — shouting, verbal abuse and name-calling, but it can be more subtle such as favouritism, making a particular cleaner clean the most difficult areas, or regularly threatening to "show them the door".

One cleaner is extremely afraid of her supervisor who verbally threatens her with her job. Another cleaner describes her supervisor as "scary". Some cleaners are publicly humiliated in front of customers. Sonja said, "If my supervisor is in a bad mood, before it made me cry, it was terrible. She would pick up on every little thing. She would belittle us before the customers." Marina said, "Our supervisor is rude. He pressures us, doesn't respect us — a control freak. He needs a better attitude." "The supervisor all time scream at me when he talk to me," said Eileen.

Over three quarters of those who had experienced bad behaviour from supervisors or managers had experienced stress over their workload. “My supervisor would text me on a daily basis wanting me to do more work, exceeding my normal working hours, and at times would use unprofessional language to make me feel threatened and scared,” said Brian. Those with sympathetic supervisors were somewhat less likely to have experienced work stress (41% of those with good supervisors).

“I have been very, very stressed with the workload. The most stressful aspect of my job is that I was made to work whilst injured and this contributed to exacerbating my injury.”
— Anu, cleaner.

Musculoskeletal injuries

Research by Kumar and Kumar into cleaning jobs found that cleaners are at risk of musculoskeletal injuries:

“that the most significant risk factors associated with the physical work of cleaners are static muscle loads (much of which involves bending and twisting of the back) and repetitive movements of the arms and hands using a high output of force. These types of prolonged static and repetitive muscle activities cause muscle fatigue and may lead to musculoskeletal disorders.”²⁸

The survey results support this observation, with a number of cleaners reporting musculoskeletal injury from their work, as the following illustrates:

“I have been very, very stressed with the workload. The most stressful aspect of my job is that I was made to work whilst injured and this contributed to exacerbating my injury.”

“There are heavy chairs that I must lift as part of my job, I injured my back some time ago and the heavy lifting exacerbates my condition.”

“It’s very difficult to clean all (toilet and bathroom) areas properly. Unfortunately this level of effort directly contributed to me being injured in the workplace. Nonetheless my boss continued to make me work despite my injury and this is unfair, particularly as I am often unsupported. This has had a major effect on my home life, when I was unable to complete basic tasks.”

“It is hard work cleaning, being on your feet all the time and you get a sore back, mopping and lifting all day.”

Exposed to other health and safety risks

Mandip also identified the risk of an occupational disease. “I had to use more bleach and it was causing me to have breathing and eye problems.” Other serious health and safety incidents reported in this survey were a non-fatal electrocution and a physical injury to a cleaner in a car park while a delivery vehicle was unloading.

In considering work injury it is important to note from Creative Ministries Network research that any work injury can precipitate a worker’s disintegration into suicide. About one-third of 109 work-related suicides in Victoria from 1989 to 2000 were contributed to by work injury, with almost half contributed to by work stress, and one-third by back injuries.²⁹ Work stress and musculoskeletal injuries are the two greatest causes of work injury and illness reported by cleaners.

A moral issue

While low-paid work, compressed work schedules, and intensified work pressure are revealed as risk factors for work stress and work injury, and are clearly identified as occupational health and safety issues, they need to be understood also as moral issues. Poor work structures will violate cleaners’ body, mind and spirit, and can then weigh them down as sufferers of injustice. This is an offence against the human dignity conferred upon each person, and needs to be redeemed.

If *Rerum Novarum* laid out the basic commitment of the Church to protecting and defending workers’ right to justice, Pope John-Paul II marked the ninetieth anniversary of Leo XIII’s encyclical with a stronger enunciation of the need for trade unions to empower workers in their desire for dignity and justice at work. John-Paul II declared that unions are “indeed a *mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice*, for the just rights of working people.”³⁰ He goes on to say that workers’ struggle is not a struggle ‘against’ others; rather it is a struggle for ‘the good of social justice’.

“A characteristic of work”, the Pope stresses, is “that it first and foremost unites people. In this consists its social power: the power to build a community. ... both those who work and those who manage the means of production or who own them must in some way be united in this community. ... it is clear that, even if it is because of their work needs that people unite to secure their rights, their union remains a constructive factor of social order and solidarity, and it is impossible to ignore it.”³¹

This vision of justice and respect for working people that are central to Christian social teaching and is impossible to ignore as a constructive foundation for social order and human community.

WORKING POVERTY

The impact of violating cleaning industry structures on cleaners and their families are wide-ranging and wide-spread. Eighty per cent of cleaners believe that their wage is inadequate for properly supporting a family. Many rely on their partner also having a job — preferably a well-paid one.

Other cleaners need to work second jobs, including on their weekends, or work cash-in-hand, just to make ends meet. Some rely on family members' parents, or their adult sons or daughters — to help them out financially. Others would not cope without government assistance — health-care cards, pensions or other forms of income support. But even those who qualify for government income supplement can find it difficult to make ends meet.

In debt

Nearly three-quarters (71%) of cleaners have problems paying bills and debts.

“Verity” says she must make a lot of sacrifice and cost cutting. “Most of the bills come in RED, extremely overdue, there’s no way to keep up with all the bills.” One after another the survey respondents echo Verity’s struggle to make ends meet.

Regina said, “There is not enough for life’s essentials expenses such as loans, bills. I have to ask children to help out with expenses.” Fernando’s parents have to give him money so he can afford to pay bills, whereas Kingsley “can’t afford to pay bills. I am in debt and I don’t know how to pay.”

Christine only gets the basics as that is all she can afford, and Lin needs another job to cover her family’s costs of living. She also leased part of her home to help with cost of living and bills.

**“Buying a house, leisure activities and taking a holiday are completely out of the question.”
— Kathy, cleaner.**

No holidays or leisure activities

Over three-quarters of cleaners (78%) view holidays as an unaffordable luxury.

Jillie takes “two jobs to pay the mortgage. I am not paid for leave so I don’t take holidays.” Marcelle was similar, saying, “I am not paid for leave so I don’t take holidays.” For many, a holiday was a distant memory. Barb “last took a holiday 25 years ago,” Kumaran “hadn’t had a holiday for the last 5 years,” while for Albert, “it was three years ago that we went

on our last holiday, but we just can’t afford to go on one, especially with two children and all the expenses that come with that.”

Fifty-nine percent of cleaners said they cannot afford leisure activities or being involved in their community. “You have to budget very carefully. You can’t socialise. You can’t drink. Nothing,” explains Gary. Margarita says “I have to just head home from work and then just stay home, I don’t go out.” While Steve “would like to go to the footy but can’t afford it and even take a holiday. The last time I took a holiday was 25 years ago.”

Missing out

Over half the cleaners also reported the following financial difficulties:

- › 64% can’t afford to visit the dentist.
- › 56% have had trouble paying for groceries.
- › 53% have experienced difficulty with rent or mortgage repayments.
- › 53% sometimes have trouble paying medical expenses.
- › 53% can’t afford to buy a house.

Jacob sums up what many cleaners are experiencing. “I have to rob Peter to pay Paul, as the saying goes, to juggle money around to make sure the rent is paid first, then the bills then the groceries. I have a health card so that helps with the doctor and dentist but the dentist wait is so long. I can’t afford to go out often — only once every month or two, and if I ever go away on holidays I have to stay with friends as I can’t afford to stay in a hotel or motel. I can’t even afford to pay the rego for my car. I have to catch public transport everywhere.”

Part-time cleaners were more likely to have experienced particular problems paying for things — things such as visiting the dentist, transport costs, buying a car, leisure activities, and rent or mortgage repayments. Housing costs and holidays were of particular concern to casual workers.

Most cleaners (80%) believe the financial problems they and their families are facing are because their pay is not keeping with the rising cost of living. They are particularly aware of the rising cost of electricity, gas, water and petrol. Many have to budget very carefully, do without, or cut back on items many Australians would take for granted, such as taking holidays, leisure activities or even visits to the doctor or dentist.

— 56% of cleaners have had trouble paying for groceries.

Families pay the highest price

As Figure 8 illustrates below, the impact of low pay on cleaners supporting children was even more extreme. Parents were even more likely to report falling behind in bills and going deeper into debt, having trouble paying their rent or mortgage, having trouble paying for groceries and transport costs and being unable to afford going to the doctor or dentist.

“I am a single parent and I have trouble meeting all the costs of running a house and providing for children.”

“Buying a house, leisure activities and taking a holiday are completely out of the question.”

“I have a notice from my bank. They want to kick us out, because we’re in arrears for two weeks! I can’t afford to keep up with all the bills. What do you get at the supermarket for \$200? It’s down to basics.”

“I have some broken teeth but I can’t get them fixed. Petrol and public transport costs for us are hard with four kids needing to get to school.”

Working multiple jobs, doing night shifts, weekend work or overtime hours just to make ends meet was common. Many cleaners felt these extra burdens then made it harder to spend quality time with children and their partners.

“I have to do two jobs to make ends meet.”

“I work weekends because of extra money on weekends but I don’t have families time as my husband works in the weekdays so we only spent time together at night with our children.”

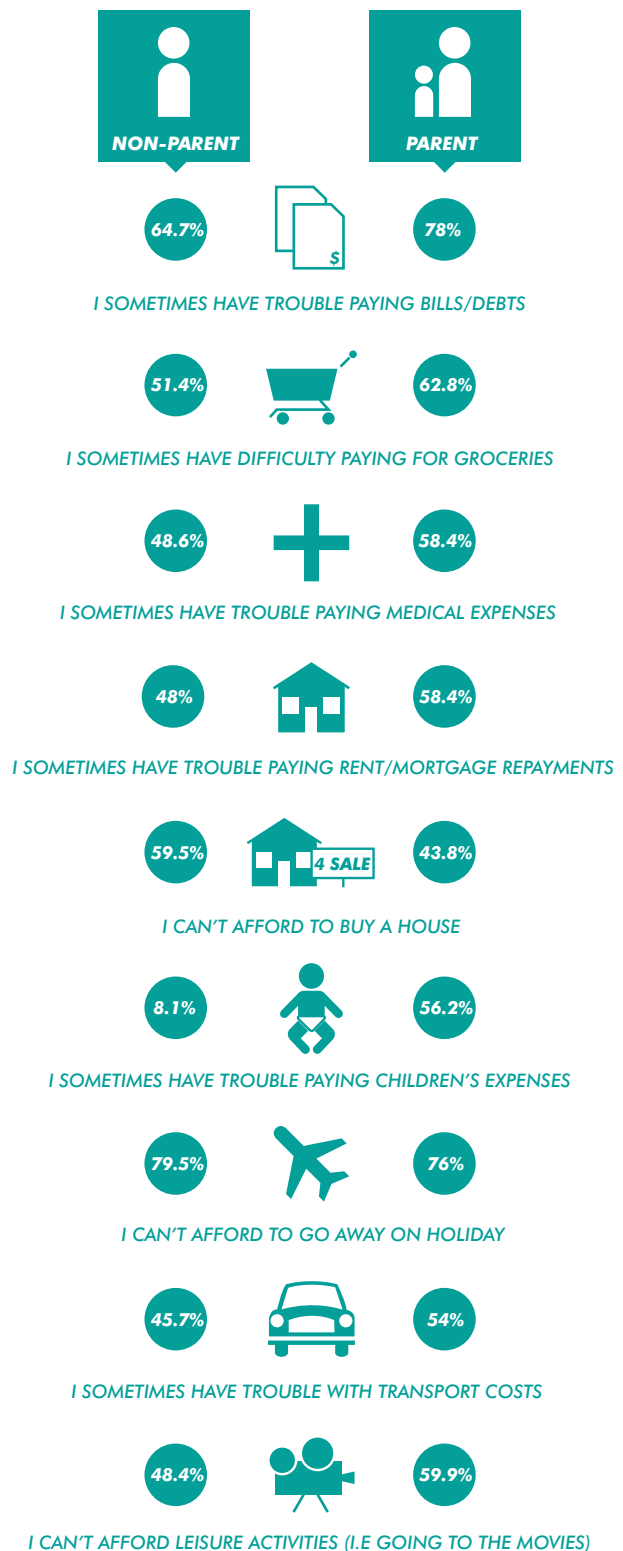
“My husband works here also, Wed to Sunday, I work Mon to Friday. We don’t have the weekend together for family time. It’s very hard.”

Even so, 56 per cent of cleaners supporting children had trouble paying for expenses associated with raising children. Cleaners reported being stretched to — and even beyond — the limit; perhaps just one unexpected bill, fewer hours in a given week or a mistake in their pay, away from calamity.

“My rent takes 50% of my wage, groceries and essentials are neglected.”

“We don’t own our home. We’re renting from the government we’re on a shoestring budget. Missing even a few hours pay can be detrimental.”

**FIGURE 8:
HOW LOW PAY AFFECTS CLEANERS
SUPPORTING CHILDREN**





6

***“You learn to cut corners. They’ve given us more to do and we can’t do it all.”
— Suelo, cleaner.***

**THE SHOPPING CENTRE
OWNERS AND TENANTS,
AND THE PUBLIC**

“A shopping centre can get very dirty quickly unless cleaners do their job properly. As soon the centre is open in morning there are customers in our food court and a mess that needs to be cleaned.”

— Mirko, a suburban shopping centre cleaner.

Cleaners understand the importance of their work to public safety, the comfort of the shopping environment, and its importance to the business of the centre.

One cleaner said, “My work is important. We are the face of the shopping centre,” while another added, “Without us the centre would be unhygienic and unfit for the public.” Another said, “We serve the community. We make the shopping centres pleasant for families, the elderly, retail workers and managers.” Fiona summarises this pride in cleaning work, “My job is important. Who is going to go to this shopping centre unless we keep it clean?”

There is mounting evidence from this survey that the relentless drive for ‘efficiency’ by shopping centre owners/managers through increasingly tight cleaning contracts is having a deleterious impact on cleaning standards in their centres. Many cleaners who don’t have enough time to clean property say that they have to cut corners to finish their work on time.

“You learn to cut corners. They’ve given us more to do and we can’t do it all,” said Suelo. Another said, “not every table gets cleaned. We brush the crumbs off, no wipes, just spot vacuuming and spot cleaning.” Others mentioned pushing rubbish down in half-full bins instead of emptying them, or just sweeping up visible rubbish and leaves in the car-park.

There is no doubt that every shopping centre relies absolutely on the hard work, experience, know-how and the thoroughness of cleaners. If a shopping centre was not cleaned properly, it would soon become a public health hazard.

Legionnaires’ disease is potentially fatal, and is caused by infection with the bacteria *Legionella*, which is often found in poorly disinfected cooling towers. Victoria’s third largest outbreak of legionnaire’s disease occurred in 2006, most likely in cooling towers in an area of Melbourne that included a retail shopping centre. Victorian legislation requires all cooling towers in Victoria to be registered, and undergo regular maintenance and testing. The Department of Human Services review of the outbreak concluded, “this outbreak highlights the fact that outbreaks of Legionnaires’ disease can still occur, and underscores the importance of a rigorous surveillance and control system, including the ability to undertake extensive environmental investigations.”³²

Even though the cooling towers at the shopping centre closest to where investigations into the source of the bacteria had negative test results, a newspaper the day after a man died from the disease reported “the shopping centre was virtually deserted”.³³ This experience underscores the importance of well-resourced environmental control systems for cleaning public buildings such as shopping centres, especially in relation to the control of infectious diseases. Unhealthy and unsafe facilities would eventually lose customers, and centre management would not be able to attract or keep good tenants in its shops. A number of cleaners emphasised this concern.

Some feel that their rotations for toilet cleaning are too short for them to do a proper job each time, so they can only do the toilet areas that “look dirty” and, as one person put it “more or less spot clean” or do “touch-ups” during the day. “When it is busy you can’t get in to check and clean it when you are supposed to,” said Sally. Juanita agreed. “There is an inadequate amount of workers to cover the number of toilets. You have to rush because of large amounts of customers and you feel the cleaning can be done better.”

One cleaner said she had asked for half an hour extra to complete the toilet cleaning properly and but the contractor would not give it to her.

Teresa cleans toilets in a suburban shopping centre. “There’s not enough time to do everything on each round, so I do what’s more dirty.” Isabella agreed: “There’s a lot of pressure, I often cut corners to complete tasks.” Jean added, “It’s simply impossible to mop floors, especially whilst customers are coming in but we do our best. However things can get missed.”

Cleaners are making decisions about cleaning priorities so they can keep up with their schedules. But is essential cleaning missing out as cleaners struggle to cope with ever demanding task intensification and compressed work schedules?

Many cleaners say that they do not always have enough time to clean tables and chairs, mop floors and empty bins in the food court properly. Is the industry approaching a point where cost-cutting by contractors will leave the shopping centre owners/managers exposed to a public health and safety risk?

— Is cost-cutting by contractors leaving the shopping centre owners/managers exposed to a public health and safety risk?



7

— *The future of good shopping centre cleaning jobs is interwoven with the sustainability of the centres themselves.*

**CONCLUSION —
CRITICAL ISSUES FOR
A NEW FUTURE FOR
CLEANING AT RETAIL
SHOPPING CENTRES**

“I’ve been here 25 years and this company is the worst I’ve ever worked for. All I’ve ever known is cleaning and it just keeps getting harder and harder to stay at work when it’s the only work I do. I just hope that whoever this survey is going to knows that without cleaners nothing gets done and we deserve to get paid more for what we do.” — Sanjay, suburban shopping centre cleaner

What image does a major retail shopping centres conjure up? Hustle and bustle. Busy people — mums, dads, children and toddlers, seniors, teenagers, sales people and office workers. Long shiny tiled corridors, sparkling light open spaces, clean polished surfaces, bright lights and reflections. Acres of cars parked in orderly parking spaces free of rubbish and leaves.

Victoria’s major retail shopping centres are hives of activity by day and by night, as people stroll around, shop and conduct business, meet up for coffee and a chat, have social gatherings. There are product promotions, special events, holiday entertainment and lots of eating.

Within every shopping centre there is an invisible and industrious army of cleaners working night and day to keep our shopping centres clean, tidy, and free of rubbish and disease. Often unnoticed by shoppers, cleaners clear away food debris and mop up food-court spills. They make sure toilets and hand-basins are clean and hygienic, they polish tiles, empty rubbish bins and direct lost shoppers. They bale mountains of cardboard, recycle bottles and cans, clean windows, and get rid of leaves and trash from around mall entrances and car parks.

The future of good shopping centre cleaning jobs is interwoven with the sustainability of the centres themselves. But the pursuit of this vision is undermined by the scale of unjust work practices imposed on cleaners by the current structure of the shopping centre cleaning industry.


The globalised practice of avoiding minimum labour standards, labour cost-cutting, and increased workloads to protect and enhance the profits of property owners/managers and cleaning contractors is a failure of corporate social responsibility. It puts too many cleaners’ health and safety at risk, contributes to tension and conflict in their families, provides an inadequate wage for today’s cost of living, and is flirting with public health and safety.

This litany of violations is a form of spiritual blindness. The focus on their company profit appears to have obscured the suffering documented in this report that is imposed by shopping centre owner/managers’ decisions. The remedy is the same today as it was enunciated by Leo XIII in 1891.

“Justice, therefore, demands ... that they who contribute so largely to the advantage of the community may themselves share in the benefits which they create. ... There is no fear that solicitude of this kind will be harmful to any interest; on the contrary, it will be to the advantage of all, for it cannot but be good for the commonwealth to shield from misery those on whom it so largely depends for the things that it needs.”³⁴

On the matter of justice as the foundation of God’s vision for human community, the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism (Isaiah 5:16)³⁵, Christianity (Luke 4:18)³⁶ and Islam (Quran, Surah 5:8)³⁷ all agree it is integral. And this is the foundation on which we call the shopping centre owners/managers and cleaning industry to base their commitment for the future.

— This litany of violations is a form of spiritual blindness. The focus on their company profit appears to have obscured the suffering documented in this report that is imposed by shopping centre owner/managers’ decisions.



***“It means I can now buy a property on my income. Before Clean Start my pay was not enough, even full-time, the bank said no to a loan. But now they have accepted my application. I am going to build a house on it next year.”
— Kamal Jimi, cleaner.***

CASE STUDY:

CLEAN START CBD CAMPAIGN

In 2006, United Voice launched the Clean Start: Fair Deal for Cleaners campaign, to highlight the crisis in the office cleaning industry and improve jobs for cleaners. By standing together in front of CBD office towers, talking to tenants and telling their stories, cleaners in every capital city in Australia helped to build consensus for urgent reform in the industry.

Kamal Jimi is a cleaner in a Melbourne office building and a refugee from Eritrea. He has been active in the Clean Start CBD campaign. He explains the difference the Clean Start campaign has made to him and his job.

“The nightshift is now up to \$21 per hour plus allowances. That makes it \$23. Before Clean Start I was earning \$19.”

“Now that we have Clean Start we are confident about our rights. We won greater respect and fairer wages.

But we have to keep fighting to make sure that the agreement continues into the future.

“We wanted respect and job security and better money. Winning that gave us a sense of achievement and more confidence at work. We can do our jobs properly. I feel very proud that we achieved that — by joining with other members and raising our union voice.

“It is my right as a worker and a person to be treated with respect but I had to fight for it. All the bills are

Alongside commercial property owners, government and responsible contractors, through Clean Start cleaners have made great strides to improve the quality and reliability of CBD office cleaning services and stabilise the cleaning workforce, whilst raising living standards and winning cleaners the respect they deserve.

In 2010, the Clean Start campaign moved to Australia’s shopping centres.

going up. I am happy that I am on the Clean Start Agreement because Fair Work Australia doesn’t put the pay up enough. Clean Start Agreement helps every office cleaner with the extra money earned and also the respect at work. This is good for us. Before the agreement the hours were terrible and there was not enough time. But now everything is getting better.

“It means I can now buy a property on my income. Before Clean Start my pay was not enough, even full-

time, the bank said no to a loan. But now they have accepted my application. I am going to build a house on it next year. I’ve never been able to own a house before. I can also afford to bring my wife over from Eritrea. She has been waiting for me to get the money together to pay her immigration fees.

“I feel very happy and excited by next year. I will build my house and have my family. And all this I have because of our Clean Start Agreement.”

ENDNOTES

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- 37 Quran, Surah 5.8. 'O you who believe, stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety.'

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