

Villawood Guards Blow Whistle on Abuses at Detention Centres*

Antony Loewenstein

Three security guards working at Sydney's Villawood detention centre have exposed occupational health and safety breaches at their workplace, in exclusive interviews with Crikey.

The three employees of MSS Security, one of the companies contracted by British multinational Serco in its management of asylum seekers, have told of staff being continually forced to work in unhealthy conditions.

MSS Security are contracted to monitor the outside perimeter and provide basic security at the Villawood centre but not manage, guard or interact with the asylum seekers. The Immigration Department told Crikey that MSS is contracted for "non-client contact".

All three MSS employees spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Greg (not his real name) said that fellow MSS guards are routinely told to undertake tasks for which they have no training. Serco staff are given minimal training to handle refugees (MSS staff call them "clients") but due to routine Serco understaffing and incompetence, Greg claimed, they are told to guard asylum seekers and then blamed by Serco if anybody escapes.

"During the last protest at Villawood," he told me, "when a refugee climbed onto the roof, Serco didn't respond for five hours by which time 11 had got onto the roof. Serco just didn't want to confront the situation, hence inaction for so long. We all suspect that regular escapes are either gross incompetence on the part of Serco or certain Serco staff knowing the refugees and helping them escape.

"Serco has problems with absenteeism, so MSS

sometimes fills the gaps inside the centre, which we aren't qualified to do. Serco doesn't want to do outside perimeter monitoring because the facilities [for staff] aren't very good."

During the recent heatwave in Sydney, Greg said the MSS staff had no access to cold water because Resolve, another company sub-contracted by Serco at Villawood, which, according to Greg, wants the security contract, switched off the tap. "I've been calling for more breaks because in summer we can't get out of the sun at all," Greg said. "Twelve hours in the open with often no shade. People looked sunburned when they come off a shift. Workcover has said it's a disgrace but nobody is doing anything about it."

MSS is constantly under intense pressure from Serco "because they're eternally paranoid about losing the contract [with the federal government] and they blame us," said Greg.

According to Greg, MSS management often takes out its frustrations with Serco by pressuring its own staff, including making them walk many kilometres around the perimeter.

"On the day I was keeling over from heat," Greg recalled, "my supervisor said, 'where's your tie?'"

Another MSS guard, Sharon (not her real name) told Crikey that resentment and physical pain is part of the job and health-and-safety legal requirements are routinely ignored.

"As perimeter guards we have to wait sometimes 20-30 minutes for a toilet break due to how busy our supervisor is and we do not get lunch breaks, as such, so we eat at the [security] boxes, where it's dusty and muddy, hot or freezing, depending

on the weather. Outside the boxes there are ant nests everywhere and inside you find ants and spiders. Fumigation has happened once in six months and did nothing to keep undesirables out."

Sharon confirmed that Serco remains heavily understaffed at Villawood and as a result MSS is forced to take up the slack. "Serco officers think ... that we are taking their jobs, especially in the perimeter. Many Serco staff are being sent to Christmas Island and Darwin even though I've seen Serco staff at Villawood playing pool with clients and using the gym."

She wonders how Serco will handle the ever-increasing influx of refugees being held in mandatory detention. A recent Fairfax report confirms that Serco and the Immigration Department are under-resourced countrywide to handle the system imposed by Canberra.

Crikey investigated MSS Security in November and found a lack of accountability between the company and Serco.

MSS did not answer repeated requests for comment, as well as emailed written questions.

MSS has about 20 staff working at Villawood during the week and about 12 people on the weekends.

Serco told Crikey that the company "values health and safety and adopts a policy of zero-harm to all of its employees, including subcontractors. Serco has key performance indicators established with its security subcontractors that must be met or they risk penalties, including termination."

Serco confirmed that at the end of February Wilson Security will replace MSS Security at Villawood but stressed that this wasn't "termination" of the contract, merely "an operational decision".

Greg told Crikey that MSS is currently in the process of "terminating" the employment of many casuals and some full-timers. There is talk of union and legal action.

The three whistle-blowers all expressed concern that Wilson guards would inevitably face the

same problems MSS staff has suffered.

The Immigration Department told Crikey that "MSS Security staff members have undertaken proscribed training. It has always been the agreement with Serco that MSS Security staff would provide perimeter and basic security; that is, non-client contact."

The evidence from the MSS staff directly contradicts this claim, as they are routinely asked to monitor refugees. Sharon said that one day she was told to guard 20 "clients" and she felt "intimidated" without any training or back-up.

A third MSS whistle-blower, Monica (not her real name), said that "the so-called staff from Serco supposed to be dismissed after the last escape are still at Villawood. Serco guards are covering for each other and sleeping on night shift because they are so understaffed that every night staff are being asked to stay back".

Saturday's Daily Telegraph claimed in a cover story headlined, "35 Asylum Sneakers", that refugees have escaped immigration detention and Serco were principally to blame for not carefully guarding refugees during outside excursions. The federal Labor government said it would not hesitate fining Serco again for the alleged breaches.

Immigration Department spokesman Sandi Logan tweeted to me over the weekend after I had blogged about this story: "Don't ever let the facts get in the way of a tabloid yarn. There is neither substance nor truth associated with this report."

Crikey has been told of numerous stories by the three whistle-blowers that suggest that Serco and its various subcontractors are constantly struggling to manage the ever-changing requirements of their main employer, the federal government.

The poor working conditions for MSS staff has caused many of them to resent what they see as the relatively good living conditions of the refugees. Sharon said that, "they get free English classes, computer classes, hair-stylist, dental, glasses, mental health, doctors and

hospitalisation or operations as soon as required. During the Muslim fasting period special meals are delivered at a time when they are allowed to eat”.

Resentment increases when security staff are given no guidance as to how to handle the situations before them. Sharon said that “clients can threaten or swear at you but if we do this, clients will lodge formal complaints with Serco or the Immigration Department, which could mean our dismissal.”

She recalled a recent incident when a MSS guard was told that a threat by a refugee against them could not be investigated—Serco allegedly covered up the problem by convincing the “client” not to lodge a formal complaint—but MSS was blamed for the issue.

“After the incident, the MSS guard had to beg for counselling, got one session and then was told by the human resources department of MSS that “my hands are tied” and the only way the guard would get any more counselling would be if they went on worker’s compensation, which they avoided due to the delicate nature of the claim.”

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