

Man of influence

PETER BATEMAN talks to Rick Dunstan, winner of the NZCTU Most Influential Employee category at the 2007 awards.

Rick Dunstan is one wise Australian – not only did he marry a Kiwi girl, but after 10 years in the West Island he allowed her to persuade him to move across to this side of the Tasman. Formerly a painter and decorator, he's been employed with NZ Steel's Hollow Sections pipe-making plant in Waiuku since 1993, currently as a forklift and crane driver, and before that as a galvaniser and "pickle bay" operator (where the pipe is processed before galvanising).

An elected health and safety rep who has also been a union delegate, Dunstan retains a touch of the Aussie larrikin, but blends it with persistent determination to achieve safer working conditions. His interest in health and safety was sparked, he says, from the conditions he and his workmates encountered in his early years at the plant.

"In the pickle bay there were fumes, so much you could hardly see each other from different ends of the pot. It was really dangerous and I thought this is not bloody good enough. So I started pushing safety."

Identifying issues

By the late 1990s he had met Fritz Drissner, health and safety officer with the Engineers Union (who nominated him for the award), and had made many valuable contacts within the plant, including the occupational health nurses, health and safety managers, chemists and others. With them he became involved in conducting surveys and collecting monitoring data to help pinpoint health and safety issues.

In 2001 his manager Chris Cussen arrived, and it wasn't long before Dunstan made himself known. "He called me a wild man because I came in with all these policies and data and letters and stuff I'd kept since 1993 and put it on his table and

said what are we going to do about it?"

The two began working on a number of issues, one of which is a classic of hazard isolation. Every three years the plant has to pump 112 tonnes of molten zinc out of the kettle and into 16 eight-tonne moulds, to allow the kettle to be serviced. It's a major operation and a hazardous task, as any flange is a potential source of a leak, and if the hot zinc contacts moisture an explosion is likely.

New procedures

Previously, up to eight staff worked next to the kettle and moulds during this process, all exposed to the risk of explosion and resulting burns, not to mention intense heat and fumes. Now, the process has been re-worked so that only one person is exposed at a time, wearing full protective gear, and with three other colleagues fully kitted up in an air conditioned room away from the kettle to observe and rotate the task, one at a time.

Standard procedure when this triennial process occurs now also includes closing the road to prevent access, and ensuring on-site fire service and ambulance staff are on hand.

Dunstan has also played a key role in improvements during the day-to-day operation of the plant. Not only has the protective gear each galvanising operator wears been vastly upgraded, but each person has his own set individually fitted and stored in named containers.

"We put in 21 fish bins with names on them. Better hygiene, and if there's a breakout you can go to your bin and pull your kit out, with no running around looking for it."

Improved safety gear

About three years ago two workers received burns, which led to an upgrade of PPE. Galvanising



operators are now kitted out in an air-fed respirator, balaclava, overalls, heat-resistant gloves and boots, visor, safety glasses, radio earmuffs and hard hat. During the triennial pump pot operation, the solo operator also dons leather jacket and trousers, all fitted to the individual.

Another change to the process is that after 20 minutes on the line wearing all this gear, operators can oversee the next 40 or so minutes of the galvanising process from the comfort and safety of an airconditioned room, rather than having to remain next to the hot process.

Dunstan also had a hand in what Cussen describes as one of the plant's largest recent capital projects, the installation of a "bag house" ventilation system, described as a big box two-thirds the size of a house with extraction fans over the tanks and 400 individual filters to clean the air before it is expelled outside.

Key contacts

Cussen describes Dunstan as someone who identifies people who could be of use, whether through knowledge or influence, and stores that information away. Then, when he needs assistance to achieve change, he wheels them in. His extensive

record keeping and his up-front declaration of intent lends him added credibility.

"I don't do these things to get feathers in my cap," says Dunstan. "I don't get swayed by the workers or by the company. I'm a determined person, and with safety I don't budge."

Cussen is not sure about the impact of these health and safety improvements on productivity, because processes have changed so much as to make before-and-after comparisons difficult. But one thing he does know: people now want to work in galvanising.

"It's turned what was an unattractive job into an attractive job. People are keen to work here."

Team effort

Dunstan is anxious to emphasise the involvement of his workmates and fellow safety reps, among many others, in enhancing safety. He isn't keen on being in the spotlight.

"I don't like being interviewed," he confides. "I've got to pronounce my words right and not swear. I'd rather talk to you over a beer at the pub. This fuss will die down soon and I can go back to the normal me."

A bashful Aussie? Pull the other one, mate. ■