

ACTU's Sally McManus to confront CFMMEU's John Setka

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

ACTU secretary Sally McManus will meet union leader John Setka on Thursday to discuss his “words and actions”, as Setka’s union allies push back against Anthony Albanese’s move to have him expelled from the ALP.

The controversial Victorian secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy union appeared with his wife Emma Walters at a news conference and on radio on Wednesday to deny he had denigrated anti-domestic violence campaigner Rosie Batty.

Last week Nine newspapers reported Setka told a meeting of the CFMMEU national executive Batty’s work had led to men having fewer rights.

At Albanese’s instigation, Setka’s ALP membership has been suspended. Albanese will move for his expulsion when the party’s national executive meets on July 5. Before that, Setka will be in court late this month on charges of harassing a woman, to which he has said he will plead guilty.

The Labor party is currently working out a procedure by which he gets natural justice when his expulsion come up.

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The Setka affair is now dominating discussion at the highest level of the union movement. McManus returned from Geneva early to deal with it.

She said in a statement on Wednesday she had “consulted with union leaders who are concerned by Mr Setka’s words and actions, which are not compatible with our values, and

have impacted on our movement.

"The ACTU condemns all acts of family and domestic violence. Australian unions have made ending family and domestic violence a priority.

"I have heard what Mr Setka had to say today. I have sought a meeting with him tomorrow to discuss these matters. I will have more to say following this meeting."

Earlier she had said that if any allegations relating to harassment were correct, "John Setka must resign. There is no place for perpetrators of domestic violence in leadership positions in our movement."

Albanese has said he is not reflecting on the court case.

Setka said the report of what he said at the CFMMEU national executive meeting about Batty was "completely false. I have always been a huge supporter of Rosie Batty and admired her tireless work".

"The member who leaked these false allegations, for nothing more than political gain, should be the one who hangs their head in shame. I completely agree with Mr Albanese [that] any comments denigrating Rosie Batty are completely unacceptable."

Pressed on what he had said, Setka replied, "It was just going into what lawyers had told me in regards to some of the laws and had nothing to do with Rosie Batty changing the laws or anything. ... There was nothing denigrating and nothing terrible said about Rosie Batty at all".

He said would not be stepping down from his union position, which is an elected one.

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Labor frontbencher Kristina Keneally told Sky she did not believe Setka's union position was tenable.

Albanese took steps to verify the story about what Setka had been reported as saying at the meeting before announcing his move against him.

But Chris Cain, national president of the Maritime Union (a division of the CFMMEU), who was at the executive meeting said the allegations about what Setka had said were false and "misinformation". He said Albanese should apologise.

Setka also got backing from the state secretary of the Electrical Trades Union Victoria, Troy Gray, who said Albanese's remarks about Setka were based on a "complete fabrication". "Albanese needs to withdraw," Gray said.

However other unions, including the Australian Services Union, which has members working in domestic violence services, are particularly concerned with the Setka situation. The ASU said in a statement: "John Setka should resign if any of the allegations against him are true. The comments attributed to him do not reflect the values of our union movement or the ASU. The alleged comments are abhorrent to victim survivors of family violence and thousands of ASU members who work on the frontline in the family violence sector."

United Voice has said it supports the ACTU's position that if any of the reported allegations against Setka were correct "he must resign". It has also expressed concern about the alleged statements about Batty.

Setka told his news conference that over recent years he and his wife had "been to hell and back, with relentless attacks on us personally for what is nothing more than some people seeking their own political gain. The result of this was our relationship hit rock bottom.

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"We've both said and done things that we aren't proud of. But this is not an opportunity to get John Setka. My family should not be used as political bait. We're working very hard together to rebuild our marriage and are confronting the issues that led to the breakdown of our marriage".

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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