

Greg Combet: 13 September 2006 (from Press Club address)

Union Values and Beliefs



The ACTU's opposition to the IR laws is not confined to the specific elements of the WorkChoices legislation.

Our opposition is more fundamental. We have different values, different beliefs, and a more positive vision for industrial relations, the economy and Australian society.

Unions don't want Australia to go down the US road. We don't want widening inequality and social dysfunction. We are opposed to the entrenchment of even more wealth and power at the top, and the increased alienation of working people from the decisions which affect their work and livelihoods.

We are fighting for a fairer and more just society, one where the benefits of economic prosperity are more fairly shared.

We are fighting to ensure that people have reasonable rights to mitigate the abuse of power by big business.

We are fighting for democratic rights and principles - to improve the quality of our democracy and society.

We believe that economic prosperity can be achieved in harmony with decent employment rights and the observance of democratic principles.

We do not accept that economic competitiveness can only be achieved at the expense of people's rights at work.

And this gets to the heart of the debate about the Government's approach to industrial relations. If the Government had the decency, honesty and courage to argue its case it would assert that the employment rights it has abolished are not economically sustainable - because that is effectively what it is saying.

It would assert that business must be awarded the freedom to adjust to competitive pressure unencumbered by union organisation, collective bargaining, obligations to deal fairly with employees, or by minimum pay and employment conditions established by independent institutions.

It is a vision we reject. Australian people know it is garbage.

The laws are bad policy and they will hurt people.

Australian Industrial Relations Commission gutted by Howard

* The AIRC loses power to set minimum wages, hear test cases to alter awards and arbitrate disputes.

* Instead of the independent Industrial Relations Commissions, the Howard Government has created the so-called Australian Fair Pay Commission.

* The AFPC will not be required to consider fairness when setting minimum wages. Nor will it set wages in the context of living standards in the community generally.

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Plan To Save Australian Manufacturing

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union National Secretary, Doug Cameron said jobs were flooding offshore while imports poured in and factories shut down.

“In the ten years since John Howard became Prime Minister we have lost 95,000 manufacturing jobs and advanced manufactured exports growth has dropped from 17.5% per year to a measly 3.9%,” said Cameron.

“With government support, Australian manufacturing could compete against India and China on high technology, not low wages.”

“While Howard has encouraged company owners to make money out of downsizing and asset stripping companies, he has taken away good jobs and the livelihoods of today’s and tomorrow’s generations.

“Australians need a plan to boost industry and create jobs in the high tech manufacturing sector. Going back

to the old economy based on exporting our natural resources, agriculture, and the tourism industry is not a recipe for secure well-paid jobs in the future.”

The AMWU is calling for a \$1 billion-a-year strategy to strengthen an industry that has seen the equivalent of 183 jobs disappear each week since the election of the Howard Government.

The plan includes:

\$300 million for manufacturers to update their capital equipment;

\$300 million for research and development;

\$225 million for export market development;

\$75 million to encourage manufacturers to adopt world’s best practice and technologies;

\$50 million to encourage foreign investment in Australian small to medium manufacturing businesses; and

\$50 million to attract and train highly skilled labour.

Bishop declares IR Law unjust

Bishop Kevin Manning, the Bishop of Parramatta has declared that Howard’s Work Choices legislation is “manifestly unjust” and unfair and the Government has “failed in its duty to promote the common good”.

He said employees cannot be treated as commodities and that in Catholic thinking, people are not valued according to their work, but rather work is valued because it is the free act of a human person.

“Let us be very clear about this: there is no right to collective bargaining under the legislation,” he said.

“Any collective bargaining that may take place is entirely at the whim of the employer”.

Bishop Manning said WorkChoices is designed to hit hard at the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Bob Hawke: 26 October 2005 (excerpt)

“We have already paid far too high a price for the Americanisation of Australian foreign policy under the Howard government including our unqualified identification with the dangerous and self-defeating adventurism in Iraq. But the damage this has done to our country is as nothing compared with this move down the path to the Americanisation of labour relations in Australia. In the USA, minimum wages are just US\$5.15 an hour and have not increased for eight years leaving the poorest working families living below the poverty line.

My friends, what John Howard is proposing is not just an attack upon an effective independent conciliation and arbitration tribunal and a free trade union movement. It is an assault upon the very core of what generations of our citizens have been proud to boast of, at home and abroad, as the essence of the Australian character - the “fair go”, the belief that might is not right, that it is not those already with privilege who

should be protected by government but the most vulnerable in our society, the encouragement of enterprise not exploitation.

What Howard has done in this area to prop up privilege and degrade the most needy is part and parcel of a broader reactionary philosophy which under his leadership has seen a perversion of priorities in expenditure on education; where the capacity of a kid to get into University depends more on the size of the parental wallet than on his or her intrinsic ability; and where from 1996 to 2003 public investment in tertiary institutions in Australia has fallen by 8 per cent while in the rest of the OECD it has increased by an average of 38 per cent”.

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ACTU Media Release Issued 15 September 2006

Over ten years, the Government has whittled away workers rights, with WorkChoices stripping away any rights of employees to collectively bargain with their employer even where that is what a majority of workers in a workplace want.

On radio this morning the Prime Minister again confirmed that he does not support the right of workers to collectively bargain with their employer where that is what a majority of workers want.

The Prime Minister said:

“We also support the right of the employer to decide the nature of the industrial structure.” (AAP News Wire Friday Sept 2006 11:45 am)

ACTU Secretary Greg Combet said:

“John Howard and Kevin Andrews have not supported any of the individual workers who have lost their jobs under their new IR laws.

They refused to support the Cowra Workers when they lost their jobs or in their fight to save their employee entitlements; they have not supported the workers at Heinemann Electric who were docked a week’s pay for not working overtime, even though they worked a full 38 hour week; and they have not supported the Radio Rentals workers in Adelaide who have been locked out of work for a month because they want a collective agreement and won’t sign an AWA individual contract.

Now John Howard is on the record not supporting workers democratically voting to have a collective

agreement. Can the Prime Minister outline to Australian workers under what circumstances he WOULD support workers’ rights.

The Government’s AWA individual contracts are all about giving the employer monopoly on bargaining. The Government is opposed to collective bargaining for workers because it wants employers to have exclusive rights. They don’t want employees have a say and that is exactly what is happening under their IR laws,” said Mr Combet.

The ACTU today also released the results of a poll taken earlier this year that indicates strong public support for giving workers the right to bargain collectively with their employer if that is what a majority of workers in a workplace want.

The poll of 1000 enrolled voters in twenty-four Coalition-held marginal electorates found more than three quarters of voters (76%) supported a law that would require employers to collectively bargain with their workers if a majority of workers want to.

The poll also found:

70% of voters believe individual contracts give too much power to the employer.

Union collective agreements are the best means of giving workers a say in their workplaces - more than two thirds of voters (68%) agree.

Collective bargaining gives power back to workers which is a good thing - 67% agree.

Judge Lashes Howard’s Building Laws

John Howard’s Building Industry laws are so out of whack with community standards that convictions could undermine respect for the law, a Federal Court judge has suggested.

Justice Tony North lashed sections of the Building Industry laws while tossing out a batch of prosecutions served by the Building Industry Commission.

He dismissed charges against two CFMEU officials and

builder B&P Caelli.

The Commission had charged B&P Caelli with paying strike pay, and the unionists with demanding it.

“If penalties are imposed on employers who pay workers for stoppages which reasonable people would see as understandable and justified ... the law itself will be seen to be out of step with reasonable community expectations,” Justice North said.



FTA: Howard hands over our public services

The so called Free Trade Agreement Howard signed with the US undermines Australia's ability to provide public services.

Thanks to the use of a "negative list" in the Australia-US FTA, all services sectors not specifically excluded from the deal are now fully liberalised under the FTA. The US says "Australia will accord substantial market access across its entire services regime, offering access in sectors such as telecommunications, express delivery, computer and related services, tourism, energy, construction and engineering, financial services, insurance, audio/visual and entertainment, professional, environmental, education and training, and other services sectors."

This means that in these areas, US companies can demand "market access" to bid for public services currently supplied by the government. The US government can challenge any regulation of any of these services as a "barrier to trade" under the FTA.

For example, in the area of "environmental services", requirements that national parks be run by government agencies may be a "barrier to trade" which could be challenged, opening national parks to be run by US corporations.

It may also make it difficult for the government to restrict the operation of some corporations. For instance, limits on the number or type of tourism service operators in environmentally sensitive areas could be a "barrier to trade", in breach of the FTA.

Not only this, but the FTA will make it almost impossible for any future Australian government to run public services currently supplied by private companies.

Finally, the Australian government has used the FTA to pledge to the US Government to privatise Telstra as part of the agreement. This is not only concerning, but undemocratic given the significant popular opposition to this measure.

WorkChoices: Rev. Dr. Ann Wansbrough 13 March 2006

There are several reasons that the Uniting Church is concerned about the recent amendments to the Workplace Relations Act under the Orwellian title "WorkChoices", which of course means "giving employers choices as to how to reduce the rights, wages and conditions of workers".

"WorkChoices" erodes human rights and social values. For the churches, it is contrary to our understanding of what God wants for the world. The effects will undermine community and family life and damage the future of Australia. WorkChoices means that this nation will pass on a distorted set of values and distorted society to our children and grandchildren.

WorkChoices vandalises 100 years of achievement by the union movement. It is based on a dangerously false mythology that everyone has equal power in the workplace. The problem is that for some people with high level marketable skills, WorkChoices mythology is sometimes

true. The government then uses that as an excuse to undermine the system of collective bargaining and protections. It is a form of "blaming the victim" – the assumption is that if you are low paid, it is your own fault. This is a dangerous attitude, which reduces understanding of poverty and the sense of compassion and solidarity which is needed to respond to the problem of poverty. It is also, of course, an attitude highly unfair to most workers.

The poverty created by WorkChoices will cause increasing damage as more and more workers lose their penalty rates and allowances, and are forced to work whatever time and days their employer wishes without any special compensation. There will be an enormous gap between the working poor, and the rest of the workforce. It is the extent of the inequity in income distribution that creates serious problems both for individual families and for communities. It is hard to be poor in a society that is generally affluent.

