

Women are facing a major challenge to hold on to their rights at work



From 1 July 2005 the Howard Government will take control of the Senate, giving it a majority in both houses of federal parliament.

For the first time since he became Prime Minister, John Howard's government will be able to pass whatever laws it likes without them being blocked or changed by the Senate.

The Government says it wants to use these new powers to make radical changes to Australia's workplace laws and take away many of your basic rights at work.

It hasn't revealed all of its plans yet but we know it wants to make sure that:

Employment conditions will be removed from awards

Around 1.6 million Australian working people rely only on awards to protect all their pay and conditions. Millions of others employed on agreements rely on awards to underpin many basic rights.

The important rights protected by awards include:

- wage rates based on skill levels
- overtime pay
- weekend or night work rates
- work related allowances
- maternity and parental leave

The Government has said they want to cut a number of important conditions from awards: conditions like skill based pay structures, bonuses, jury service, allowances and picnic days.

Women will be worst affected by these changes as more than 60% of award only workers are women.

Without award conditions, many women will be forced to negotiate with their employer for basic

rights and conditions they currently take for granted.

Minimum wages will be lower

For more than 100 years minimum wages in Australia have been set by an independent body, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. This system ensures that low paid workers and their families are not left behind.

The Howard Government thinks that minimum wages in Australia are too high.

The Howard Government has opposed every minimum wage increase since 1996. If it had its way, women on the minimum wage would be at least \$44 a week worse off than they are now.

So the Government wants to change the way minimum wages are set by taking away the powers of the independent Industrial Relations Commission. Minimum wages would probably be set by a "panel of experts" - people specially chosen by the Howard Government to make sure wages stay low.

It would also take away skill based wages, which would stop work value cases to close the wages gap between men and women. This will prevent cases like the one earlier this year which achieved a \$64 a week pay rise for Victorian child care workers.

More individual contracts will undercut existing employment conditions

The Howard Government introduced a new type of individual contract in 1996, called an Australian Workplace Agreement (AWA).

AWAs were specifically designed to make it easier for employers to undercut award and collective agreement conditions. AWAs allow employers to single out employees to force new working conditions on to them one at a time.

AWA individual contracts are often used to give employers more control over your working hours, to

reduce overtime pay, and to make more people casual.

The Howard Government has spent millions of dollars promoting AWAs since 1996 and they already cover around 400,000 Australians.

Now the Government wants to make it even easier to force you on to an AWA individual contract.

It wants to change the rules to make it easier to get AWA individual contracts approved and to let employers offer them at any time.

These changes will make it harder for working women to negotiate with their employer collectively, forcing individual workers to accept lower wages and conditions to secure a job.

More AWA individual contracts will mean less family friendly working hours and lower standards of living.

A group of rural mothers were recently sacked from a Victorian mushroom farm after they refused to sign AWAs, which would have cut their pay by an average of \$150 per week – a pay cut of 25%.

Unions will be kept out of workplaces

Unions provide important support and assistance to women in their workplaces. The Howard Government wants to keep unions out of workplaces.

The Government is already trying to pass laws which include changes to make unions give employers 24 hours written notice of the reason for their visit a workplace. This exposes union members to intimidation if their manager knows the union is coming to help with a particular issue.

Redundancy pay and unfair dismissal protection in small businesses will be abolished

The Howard Government thinks that the job security of women who work in small businesses is totally disposable.

It wants to take away all protection from unfair dismissal, as well as any entitlement to redundancy pay for these women.

The Government obviously thinks that anyone who works for a small business isn't entitled to even the most basic rights.

People who work for small businesses shouldn't be treated as second class citizens by the Howard Government.

KEY ISSUES AFFECTING WOMEN TODAY

- **Casualisation:** one in three women are working as casuals with no access to paid sick leave, annual holidays or public holidays.
- **Superannuation:** Spending less time in the workforce due to caring responsibilities (both children and ageing parents) women typically need to make extra contributions to their super (above the 9% SG) more than twice the level of men if they are to retire comfortably.
- **Pay Equity:** On average full time working women will get paid 15% less than their male colleagues and earn on average \$150 a week less than men.
- **Low Pay:** In the last three years alone, of the net new women's jobs created more than half of (114,000) paid less than \$500 a week.
- **Family friendly workplaces:** AWA individual contracts are less likely than collective agreements to contain family friendly working hours.

Unions are campaigning on all of these issues. The best way to better pay equity, family friendly working conditions and secure, well paid jobs is through collective bargaining and decent award conditions.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT THE UNION CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT WOMEN'S RIGHTS AT WORK

- Tell your work colleagues, family and friends about the Howard Government's plans or give them a copy of this info sheet.
- Lead discussions in your women's network – strong communities can help protect women's rights at work.
- Join the ACTU's national week of union and community action – 27 June to 1 July.
- Write to or visit your local Liberal or National Party Federal MP know that you oppose the Government's plans to take away basic rights at work.
- Get vocal – let your local newspaper or radio station know your views about women's rights at work.

You can also contact the ACTU Hotline on:

1300 362 223

Access Rights at Work campaign materials, petitions and information at:

www.rightsatwork.com.au



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