

A cynical exercise in window-dressing

Australian unions campaign for "reasonable" working hours

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The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the country's peak union body, is carrying out a campaign for "reasonable working hours". It is highly unlikely that any but a handful of union members and officials even know of the existence of this crusade. No mass meetings have been called, and no strikes or industrial action have taken place.

It began last year with a survey completed in October that linked workplace-related illness and accidents and the increase in working hours over the past decade. A year later, ACTU officials lodged an application with the Australian Industrial Relations Commission for a test case to insert a "reasonable working hours" clause into federal awards. The case was due to begin in November but has been delayed.

An ACTU spokesman told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the hearing was now likely to begin early next year. "You understand," he said, "these things take time." The mixture of bureaucratic lethargy, indifference and cynicism contained in this offhand remark simply underscores the cosmetic character of the campaign itself.

For the first half of last century the trade unions sought the eight-hour day and the 40-hour week, which was finally won in the late 1940s. The fact that the present campaign is limited to "reasonable working hours" indicates just how far the conditions of workers have deteriorated over the last two decades. Compulsory overtime, 12-hour shifts, weekend and late night work—in many cases introduced with the agreement of union leaders—as well as constant pressure to work longer hours, extra shifts and overtime make a mockery of what is now supposed to be a 38-hour week.

The ACTU campaign will do nothing to halt the trend. What is "reasonable" or "unreasonable" will be left to subjective interpretation. A "successful" outcome to the ACTU's case will simply mean that a clause in the present awards requiring employees to work a "reasonable amount of overtime" will be replaced with one saying that workers "will not be required to work unreasonable hours".

As the same spokesman told the WSWWS, what is meant by

"unreasonable hours" will not be defined in the awards "as this may differ from industry to industry according to their requirements". Thus there will be no upper limit to the number of hours an employee can be required to work. It will be left to negotiations in different industries and workplaces between employers and the unions—in other words, to the same people who are responsible for the present state of affairs.

Just how devastating longer hours have been on the lives of workers was made clear by the contents of the study, which was commissioned by the ACTU and then buried away.

The survey of 7,000 workers and health and safety delegates in over 800 workplaces in 13 different industries showed that little more than a decade after the introduction of the 38-hour week, 50 percent of workers regularly worked more than 40 hours weekly, 27 percent more than 45 hours and 12 percent work over 50 hours.

Some 45 percent of the respondents said they worked some unpaid overtime every week with 13 percent doing 10 or more hours unpaid work. Just 29 percent said that all their overtime was paid.

One in four of those surveyed said they were working far longer hours than they worked 12 months earlier and over half of the 7,000 said that long hours, increased shift work and broken shifts had contributed to health problems.

According to the study, intensive work schedules and longer hours are linked to a higher risk of heart disease and exacerbate existing medical problems, including diabetes, epilepsy, hypertension, asthma and digestive disorders. Those surveyed complained of chronic fatigue, stress related illness, anxiety and depression. Over 78 percent said they suffered fatigue, either frequently or sometimes.

The study cited recent overseas research showing that people who work more than 11 hours a day had twice the rate of heart attacks of those who worked only seven to nine hours.

Over three quarters of the respondents said it was common for them to work more than five days in a row and 5 percent said they never had two consecutive days off. One in four said the opportunity to take regular rest or meal breaks at their workplace had diminished over recent years.

The survey estimated that fatigue was a contributing factor in up to 40 percent of industrial and workplace accidents. Over 42 percent of those interviewed claimed that because of fatigue they had been involved in accidents or near misses. One in seven said they had had car accidents or near misses travelling between work and home due to long hours or insufficient rest between shifts.

More than 56 percent indicated that shift work systems operated in their workplaces but less than a quarter expressed a preference for shift work. Over 88 percent of those working shifts frequently had less than 12 hours break between them.

Pointing to the growth of sporadic and broken shifts, 20 percent of the respondents said they worked shifts of five hours or less and 30 percent worked shifts of between five and eight hours. The survey noted that people who worked short shifts and broken shifts were often prevented from taking any rest breaks.

Interviews in the study revealed that workers are under constant pressure.

One department store worker in Brisbane said working the extended hours on Thursday late night shopping had become an “ordeal”. She caught two buses across the city to get to work to begin a 12-hour shift. After being on her feet all day and with only a one-hour break for lunch, she clocked off at 9pm and arrived home exhausted at 10.45pm. In addition to the Thursdays, she worked eight-hour shifts on four days and three weekends a month.

She said workloads had increased because jobs had been cut and workers who leave were not replaced. Casuals may be called in at peak times but not to cover for workers on sick leave. “On days like Mondays when there are lots of people rostered off, one staff member can be doing the jobs of more than two or more people,” she said.

Shop assistants suffer from aching legs, varicose veins and circulation problems from standing for long periods, as well as from carpal tunnel syndrome and neck and lower back problems from lifting heavy merchandise.

A customer service officer in a Queensland regional council office said she now spends more hours on the job. Whereas her standard shift was once 7 hours and 15 minutes, she now works eight and half-hours a day. She accumulates flextime but cannot take it off because she is too busy due to the increased workload following a company restructure.

Remarking on the impact of long hours on social life, she said: “You get home from work tired and depressed, and

become anti-social, not at all interested in participating in family life.”

A worker employed in a welding shop said he had fallen to sleep at the wheel of his car and veered onto the wrong side of a highway when he was travelling home after working a 12-hour shift. At the time he had worked 21 days straight. He said he once worked on offshore oilrigs in Scotland but gave this away because he had no family life.

“But I am doing the same thing here, working 12-hour night shifts, leaving home at 3pm for a long drive, working from 5pm until 5am and then driving home again. My health is suffering and I feel drained, especially in the summer.”

A nurse complained that she sometimes worked eight days straight if her day off fell at the start of a roster. She said nurses often finished a late shift at 11pm, drove home, slept and were back on duty by 7am. “This is the minimum time between shifts, but it is not enough to get home, wind down, finally get some sleep and then get up early.”

An ambulance driver in rural Gippsland, Victoria, said he was rostered on duty for eight days straight then had six days off. He worked 10-hour shifts on weekdays and nine-hour shifts on the weekend. Shift work had taken its toll over the years. “I have had lots of sleep disturbances and have missed many family events.” He complained that he was unable to sleep after being called out some nights. “If I can't sleep I come home and watch TV. I wake up with a headache the next day, feeling dreadful, and then go out and do it all again.”

The ACTU survey just scratched the surface, of course. In many cases, workers are compelled by low wages to work longer hours or even two jobs. For most working class families, two incomes are now essential to make ends meet. Others have been forced to become subcontractors and to accept whatever hours and conditions are dictated in order to get work. Those in full-time work are often no better off and are forced by the threat of unemployment to accept appalling conditions.

In these conditions, the ACTU's legal case in the Industrial Relations Commission for “reasonable working hours” is a cynical exercise in window dressing, aimed at diverting attention from the situation for which the trade unions bear central responsibility.



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