

Australian minister admits unemployed will be compelled to accept inferior conditions

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Since October 10, working people in Australia have been subjected to a media advertising blitz by the federal government aimed at selling its deeply unpopular industrial relations “reform” known as WorkChoices. The legislation is due to be presented to parliament shortly.

All up, the government will have spent in excess of \$40 million of public money to buy spots on primetime television and radio, and in national and local newspapers. The campaign proclaims ad nauseam that WorkChoices is about ensuring “fairer” workplaces, in which a raft of rights and conditions will be protected by law. To give the appearance of rock-solid certainty to these claims, the words “Protected by Law” are slammed down by a rubber stamp as each “guarantee” appears in the ads. These guarantees include annual leave loading, meal breaks, shift penalties, overtime rates and redundancy payments.

However, under questioning on the ABC TV program *Insiders* last month, Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews let the cat out of the bag. He admitted that the legislation, combined with the current breaching powers of the government’s social security agency Centrelink, will mean that unemployed people can be forced to take jobs without those very conditions.

Under the social security regime, recipients can be stripped of their entire welfare benefit for eight weeks if deemed to have breached Centrelink rules three times. Refusing to take a job offer is considered a breach, unless the person can give a reason acceptable to the agency.

Insiders host Barrie Cassidy outlined to Andrews the case of an unemployed single father “Billy” offered a job with a workplace agreement that excluded the “Protected by Law” conditions. He then asked: “What

choice would Billy have in that situation? If he knocks back a job, Centrelink will take away his welfare. Now, he has no choice. If he doesn’t take the job, no matter what the conditions, he loses his benefits.”

Andrews replied: “We don’t make any excuses for this. We believe that the best form of welfare that a person can have is to have a job.” To soften this harsh reality, he asserted that taking jobs with inferior conditions would eventually lead to better jobs. “We know that within a year four out of ten people who have a job moved on to another better job,” he said.

One hardly needs a Harvard University degree to understand the consequences of forcing tens of thousands of unemployed to take jobs with vastly inferior working conditions. The aim is to exert downward pressure on existing working conditions. It will only be a matter of time before employed workers will have to accept the same, or be replaced.

Furthermore, sacking those who object will be made far simpler under WorkChoices. The current unfair dismissal laws, which provide minimal job protection for two thirds of the workforce, will be abolished. As workers are sacked, the “better” jobs touted by Andrews, which are already in very short supply, will cease to exist.

Andrews’ claim that four in ten workers progress to better jobs does not hold water either. One only has to look at the decades-long trend toward low-paying casual and part-time employment at the expense of fulltime jobs. Since 1996, the year the Liberal-National coalition government took office, 35 percent of all new jobs created have been casual, continuing a trend begun under previous Labor governments.

Today, more than one in four or 27.9 percent of all workers in Australia are casual, and the number is growing. A new term—“long-term casual

employment”—has been invented. Many workers, especially young people, take casual work, hoping it will lead on to permanent, better-paying jobs. However, rather than progressing to better positions, many remain bogged down as part of the permanent part-time workforce.

An Australian Bureau of Statistics survey in September last year showed that under-employment now stands at close to 20 percent, with around 1.85 million people wanting more hours. Recent research commissioned by the Australian Council of Trade Unions found that 70 percent of casuals, if given the choice, would convert to permanent jobs. Under the new industrial relations regime, any step into fulltime work will depend on accepting inferior working conditions.

Andrews’ admission on the *Insiders* program will have confirmed what many working people thought anyway. Such blatant attempts at deception are only fueling popular contempt for Prime Minister John Howard’s government and hostility to its workplace “reforms”. There is growing evidence that the massively-funded media blitz is failing to have the desired effect.

A poll of 1,000 people conducted by the *Age* newspaper showed that 19 percent, or fewer than one in five, thought the changes would make industrial relations fairer. An Ipos Mackay poll found that even people who traditionally voted for the ruling Coalition were evenly split—32 percent believed the changes would make workplace relations less fair, as opposed to 33 percent who thought the opposite.

The poll results are significant, considering the government’s spin-doctors went to great lengths to promote the illusion of a “fairer” system. The WorkChoices booklet bears the title “A simpler, fairer national workplace relations system for Australia,” but the inclusion of the word “fairer” was an expensive afterthought. Tens of thousands of booklets without the magic word had to be pulped, adding to the already vast cost of the advertising campaign.

The failure of the advertising blitz testifies to the deep-going distrust among broad sections of population who regard Howard and his fellow ministers as habitual liars. To advance its reactionary agenda, the government has lied about everything from the “children overboard affair” used to villify asylum

seekers prior to the 2001 election, to the fraudulent claims about weapons of mass destruction to justify Australian military involvement in the illegal invasion of Iraq.

No amount of sugar coating, official assurances and outright fabrications can cover up the real agenda behind the proposed workplace reforms—cutting people off social security benefits and stripping back workers’ rights and conditions so as to create a large and compliant pool of cheap labour that employers can readily exploit.



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