

# Australian unions praise Labor's new "Fair Work" laws

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Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Sharon Burrow joined hands in celebration after Labor's "Fair Work" industrial relations laws commenced on July 1, in an attempt to blind workers as to their real nature.

At a ceremony marking the start of Labor's IR regime, Gillard used the word "fair" 46 times, claiming that the legislation "delivers on the Rudd government's [election] promise for fair and balanced laws". Burrow welcomed "the beginning of a harmonious, respectful future" that would be "celebrated by workers across the country". During the ceremony Burrow warmly embraced Gillard.

There is nothing for workers to celebrate about Labor's laws. They are designed as a straightjacket for the working class as the Rudd government and employers use the economic crisis to mount a far-reaching assault on jobs, wages and working conditions. Above all, the legislation outlaws any strikes to fight layoffs and cuts to hours and pay.

Labor's laws retain the core elements of the former Howard government's WorkChoices laws, prohibiting all industrial action except during limited bargaining periods for new enterprise agreements. Even then, strikes in "essential services" can be banned and Labor's new Fair Work Australia agency can halt industrial action if it "causes significant industrial harm" to an employer.

Widespread hostility to WorkChoices was a major factor in Howard's defeat at the 2007 election. The ACTU, however, diverted the mass movement behind

the election of the Rudd government, promoting the illusion that Labor would dismantle Howard's repressive laws.

Then, as the government set about fine-tuning its laws in collaboration with the employers, the ACTU peddled the lie that the unions would push for changes further down the line. Noticeably, Burrow's speech during the ceremony made no mention of asking for a "second round" of legislation.

The mutual back-slapping came just weeks after Gillard launched a vicious attack on striking West Gate Bridge construction workers at the June ACTU conference, accusing them of being balaclava-hooded thugs, and telling union officials they would be better off "pounding the streets" to support the new laws rather than lobbying for changes.

Gillard's broadside came in response to a mouse-like protest by some of the conference delegates over the government's decision to preserve until 2010 the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC), the Howard government's building industry policing agency, and then transfer its powers to a specialist unit of Fair Work Australia.

The ACTU protest, which consisted of nothing more than delegates donning yellow anti-ABCC t-shirts, was a stunt designed only to placate workers' hostility to the ABCC and maintain some semblance of opposition to Labor's punitive agenda.

It was not long before the unions took up Gillard's message. Union officials lined up behind Burrow to pay homage to Labor's laws. Liquor, Hospitality and

Miscellaneous Workers Union national secretary Louise Tarrant said she was confident they would “benefit workers in the hospitality industry” while Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) construction division national secretary Dave Noonan declared that “workers on the fringes would get greater protection”.

ACTU secretary Jeff Lawrence revealed that unions had been hard at work since the ACTU conference to hose down the expectations of their members. He insisted that the “new bargaining rules were the most important aspect of the [Fair Work] act, something which unions had been active in explaining to workers in the past few weeks”.

As Lawrence’s comments highlight, the unions back the legislation because it places “collective bargaining” via unions at the centre of the workplace laws, instead of the Howard government’s individual contracts. The new arrangements will strengthen the capacity of the unions to act as industrial police for the employers and the Labor government, as they have been doing with increasing intensity since the global financial crisis erupted.

Over the past six months, unions have pushed thousands of workers into pay freezes or cuts, short-time working and so-called job-sharing across many industries, including auto and retail, directly imposing the burden of the economic breakdown while claiming that the sacrifices would protect jobs—a claim proven false by the mounting destruction of full-time jobs.

Union leaders have rushed to assure the government and employers that they will prevent any coordinated resistance by workers—through “pattern bargaining”—and strictly enforce the system of individual enterprise bargaining introduced under the Keating Labor government in the 1990s. This system, fervently supported by the ACTU, forces workers to negotiate on a plant-by-plant basis, pitting them against each other in an endless cycle of cost-cutting in the name of making “Australia internationally competitive”.

As the new laws came into effect, the *Australian*

denounced Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) national president Julius Roe for claiming that the union might seek cost-of-living pay increases of 4 percent in the 1,300 enterprise work agreements up for renegotiation in the manufacturing sector, and higher wages “where companies were performing well”.

Australian Industry Group chief executive Helen Ridout declared that such increases were “unaffordable in the current economic climate.... The priority is to save jobs and many companies have put in pay freezes into place.” Burrow soon echoed Ridout’s position, telling ABC radio that the unions’ priority was “first and foremost job security” and “no union’s going to bargain a company out of business”.

Speaking on the same station, Gillard expressed confidence in the unions, dismissing any possibility that they would lead a “wages breakout”. Underscoring the purpose of the “Fair Work” regime, she declared: “[W]hen people knuckle down and actually work under these laws, they’ll have to be sitting around a bargaining table in their workplace, striking a deal that works best for their workplace. Now, those deals will have to be about productivity, they’ll have to be about growing the business.”



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