

Coalition and Family First amendments to IR laws would leave 3 million workers with reduced rights

More than 3 million Australian workers would be adversely affected by amendments to new industrial relations laws proposed by the Coalition and Family First, unions say.

Almost a million workers would lose protection from unfair dismissal during a worsening job market if a Coalition change to lift the small business threshold to 25 employees was adopted.

A separate amendment proposed by Family First to exempt businesses with less than 20 employees would adversely impact 36% of the workforce and expose workers in small businesses to potential exploitation.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow said the Coalition proposal would worsen job security for working Australians at a time when unemployment was rising.

“People are rightly worried about their own jobs and those of their family in the downturn. They want the security of stronger IR laws that protect their rights,” she said.

“Two-thirds of Australians, according to our polling, say that the economic downturn makes it more important than ever to increase the rights and protections of working Australians.

“Three-quarters of Australians want unfair dismissal protection restored for all workers.

“In the economic downturn, workers need stronger rights and protection, not less job security, as Senator Fielding and the Coalition propose.

“Whose side are they on: business or Australian workers?”

Ms Burrow said an amendment proposed by Family First Senator Steve Fielding to exempt small businesses from right of entry rules would deny more than 3 million workers access to union help and advice in their workplace.

“When workers believe they are being underpaid or their conditions are not being met, they turn to their union for help,” Ms Burrow said.

“Unions have always been able to enter workplaces for discussions with workers and to investigate alleged underpayments or breaches of their members’ workplace rights.

“Senator Fielding has been a vocal critic of WorkChoices in the past but he is now proposing changes that would be worse than the restrictions on union advice and help under WorkChoices.

“Workers in small business are more vulnerable to exploitation and rip-offs as those in big business, and it would be totally unacceptable for the law to discriminate against them.

“What Senator Fielding is saying is if you work in a small business, you are not entitled to the protection that the rest of the workforce has.”

Ms Burrow said the proposed Fair Work Bill already provided extensive safeguards on union right of entry, including a requirement that permit holders be fit and proper people, a 24 hour notice period, requirements that meetings be held during breaks from work, the Privacy Act, and a legal onus to prove there is reasonable suspicion of a breach.

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