

March 2010

Tony Abbott will bring back WorkChoices

ACTU fact sheet

The Liberals' WorkChoices

The Howard Government never obtained a mandate from voters for WorkChoices. Instead, they took advantage of control of the Senate to ram through a policy that had no public support.

Under WorkChoices, Australian workers faced the following cuts to their rights:

- Protection from being sacked unfairly was stripped away from more than four million workers.
- Employers had the power to put workers onto AWA individual contracts that cut the award pay and conditions of employees.
- The award safety net was effectively abolished and there were changes to the way minimum wages to drive down the pay of low income workers.

Young workers, women and casuals were the most vulnerable to WorkChoices and ended up being its worst victims.

More than a million low paid workers suffered real pay cuts of up to \$90 a week from WorkChoices' changes to minimum wages.

Hundreds of thousands of workers were pushed onto AWA individual contracts and:

- 70% lost shift loadings
- 68% lost annual leave loadings
- 65% lost penalty rates
- 49% lost overtime loadings.
- 25% no longer had public holidays.

Tony Abbott has failed to rule out going back to WorkChoices

Liberal leader Tony Abbott was a key Minister in the former Liberal Government that introduced WorkChoices.

When he was first elected leader of the Liberals, Mr Abbott said: "*The phrase WorkChoices is dead. No-one will ever mention it again.*" But he did not distance the Liberals from reviving elements of WorkChoices.

Elsewhere, in his book *Battlelines*, he said: "*WorkChoices was a political mistake, but it may not have been an economic one.*"

Unfair dismissals

At a recent meeting with business executives, Mr Abbott said he would remove protection from unfair dismissal for workers in small business.

You know, at four elections running we had a mandate to take the unfair dismissal monkey off the back of small business and we will once more seek that mandate. (12 February 2010)

That means 2.3 million workers – a quarter of Australia’s workforce - would no longer be protected from unfair dismissal. Put another way, nine out of 10 businesses would be exempted from unfair dismissal laws.

Cuts to pay and conditions

Mr Abbott has also promised a return to individual contracts. AWA individual contracts were banned by the Rudd Labor Government because they led to widespread cuts to workers’ pay, conditions and rights.

But Mr Abbott will bring them back. In the same speech to a business audience quoted above, he said:

At four elections running we had a mandate to introduce statutory non-union contracts and we will seek to renew that mandate.”

Mr Abbott has also said he will allow employers to negotiate job contracts with young workers that cut their pay and conditions by reducing the requirement to be paid for a minimum number of hours.

This means employers would be able to call in staff and send them home after as little as half an hour. In the example Mr Abbott cites, it would reduce an 18-year-old worker’s take home pay by almost \$50 a week compared to the new award – see table:

Retail award 2010

Min. wage – Retail employee level 1	
Young worker at school – age 18 70% of adult rate Works 3 shifts a week Cut to shift time from 3 hrs to 1.5 hrs = 1.5 hrs cut	\$420 a week full time - \$11.05 / hr \$16.58 cut per shift \$49.74 cut per week (3 shifts)
Young worker – age 21 Works 5 shifts a week Cut to shift time from 3 hrs to 1.5 hrs = 1.5 hrs cut	\$600 a week full time - \$15.79 / hr \$23.68 cut per shift \$118.42 cut per week (5 shifts)

Penalty rates at risk

Hundreds of thousands of Australians rely on penalty rates to compensate them for working public holidays or shifts at night and on weekends. These are also at risk under the Liberals.

In a recent interview, Liberal industrial relations spokesman Eric Abetz avoided making a guarantee that weekend penalty rates would not be cut:

*But pressed whether that meant all penalty rates were safe, including those on the weekend, he replied: "Let's wait and see what the policy will be."
(‘Penalty rates face changes under Libs’, *The Mercury*, 18 Feb 2010.)*

Deputy Leader Julie Bishop holds the same views:

“Bringing back inflexible working conditions such as the penalty rates regime is costing employers more.” (ABC radio 774, 15 February 2010)

Australian public don't trust Tony Abbott and the Liberals

A recent national poll by Essential Research found:

- Over half (57%) of Australians surveyed think that if Tony Abbott and the Liberals win the next election it is likely that they will introduce at least some parts of WorkChoices, 23% think it is unlikely and 20% don't know.
- 77% of Labor voters, 65% of Green voters and 50% of Coalition voters think that it is likely that at least some parts of WorkChoices will be introduced if Abbott and the Liberals win the next election.
- People aged 45 – 55 were more likely to think that if the Liberal party wins the next election, at least some parts of WorkChoices will be introduced
- Half (50%) of those surveyed do not believe Tony Abbott when he says that WorkChoices is dead and would not be reintroduced by a future Liberal Government, 22% believe Abbott and 28% don't know.

Q. Do you believe Tony Abbott when he says that WorkChoices is dead and would not be reintroduced by a future Liberal Government?

	%
Yes	22%
No	50%
Don't know	28%

Essential Research, 22 Feb 2010

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