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## Work and Family Test Case

### Introduction

Achieving a balance between work and family life has become an increasingly important issue for Australian workers and is the focus of widespread political, community and workplace debate.

Long term social changes in Australia mean that only one-third of dependant children in couple families, and half of those in lone parent families, have a "stay at home" parent. Changes in family formation, living arrangements, marital separation and labour force participation (especially for mothers) mean that in the majority of families with dependants, all the adults have responsibilities to paid employment. At the same time the proportion of the population requiring care has increased, and is predicted to continue to do so with the aging of the population. This has been accompanied by a reduced reliance on institutional care, and increasing reliance on community care.

The major shifts in family lifestyles have been accompanied by changes in the way work is organised. In response to competitive pressure there has been an extension of long hours of work and the introduction of employer initiated flexibility over working time.

The ACTU has developed a range of policy responses to these changes. In 2001 the ACTU's Parental Leave for Casuals Test Case extended the award right of 12 months unpaid parental leave to long-term casual workers. In 2002 the ACTU's Reasonable Hours Test Case established a new award right for employees to refuse unreasonable overtime on grounds including their family responsibilities. The ACTU is actively lobbying for federal government-backed paid maternity leave of at least 14 weeks for all working women.

An examination of the different needs of workers over their life course has identified other key requirements to assist employees, particularly women, in balancing their caring and employment responsibilities. The ACTU's Work and Family Test Case responds to the identified needs for greater flexibility in managing workplace transitions, both in and out of employment, and between full time and part time work.

**Work arrangements including the availability of quality, secure part-time work, family friendly roster schedules, special leave and career breaks are poorly developed in Australia compared to other OECD countries.**

Providing greater choices for employees to achieve a better balance between their work and family lives is overdue in Australia. The ACTU's Test Case will ensure more flexible choices are available to

all employees, including casual workers who are currently without leave entitlements.

**Sharan Burrow**

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