New legal push by employers threatens to cut minimum pay for retail workers by $79 a week

Hundreds of thousands of retail workers across Australia face significant pay cuts if employers succeed in a new legal push to cut the award minimum hours of work, say unions.

Part time retail workers could lose up to $79 a week if their minimum weekly shift is reduced from 15 hours down to 10 hours, as employers are seeking in a major case today (Thursday) before the new industrial umpire, Fair Work Australia.

The ACTU and unions will today argue in Fair Work Australia that a three hour call-in is a fair and appropriate minimum standard that prevents exploitation of casual employees.

Mr Lawrence said Fair Work Australia should dismiss the application from retail employer groups to vary the new Modern Retail Award just months after it began operation.

“So-called evidence from employer lobby groups that thousands of young workers’ jobs are at risk from the new award is just irresponsible scare-mongering,” Mr Lawrence said.

“It is driven by a desire to undermine the award system and effectively re-introduce WorkChoices.

“Minimum hours are an important safety net condition for all workers and act in awards like a minimum rate of pay.

“A minimum call of three hours exists in many awards besides the retail industry, and ensures that people are not called in for short shifts.

“It is designed to protect people such as working mothers, who have costs including travel and childcare to think of. It is unreasonable to expect workers to attend a shift for as little as half an hour, especially at short notice.

“School-age young workers are paid as little as $9 an hour under the modern retail award and it is clearly not a major impost on employers to pay them for a minimum of three hours work.

“If employers want more flexibility for their junior staff, they should be looking at negotiating an enterprise agreement.

“Provided employees are better off in other areas of their pay and conditions, employers are able to reduce the minimum call out requirement in collective agreements.

“The Retailers’ Association are using this case as a means to undermine the pay and conditions of all workers in the retail industry.

“The case is part of a political agenda by employer groups who want the Liberal Party to scrap the award system and reintroduce WorkChoices,” Mr Lawrence said.

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