

Wednesday, 9 March 2011

Employers have failed to act on equal opportunity; time for stronger enforcement, say unions

With a gender pay gap of about 17% and appallingly low rates of women in senior positions in the workplace, it is time for employers to face stronger enforcement of equal opportunity laws, say unions.

Today's announcement of reform of Australia's equal opportunity workplace laws after decades of inaction by employers will be welcomed by unions, said ACTU President Ged Kearney.

"Employers have had several decades to deliver equal opportunity in workplaces but have failed to do it, so it's now time for legislative enforcement," Ms Kearney said.

"We are pleased that the Federal Government is acting on recommendations made by unions to make reforms to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act.

"Equality in the workplace needs to be backed by accountability and enforcement.

"These are long-awaited changes that unions welcome in principal, but we are keen to see more detail, particularly in reference to enforcement measures.

"We will work to ensure these changes are properly implemented in workplaces so we can get real cultural change.

"That change must address the barriers many women face in the workplace and must encourage a fairer balance of caring responsibilities between men and women workers."

Ms Kearney said unions were particularly pleased to see action on meaningful data collection and reporting, greater corporate responsibility, greater employee participation in the reporting process and stronger enforcement and compliance.

"These are measures the ACTU called for in our submission to the Government's review of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act in 2009," she said.

"We know that the only way to effect real change is to make employers accountable and to ensure employees understand their rights.

"Until now, there has been little transparency about which employers comply with equal opportunity laws and therefore no accountability.

"Without proper statistical data, we have no real way of knowing what is going on in Australian workplaces and what issues need to be addressed. These reforms should change that."

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