

Friday, 6 May 2011

## Challenging times for Australian workers makes union membership more important than ever

A big increase in private sector employees has been paralleled by union membership numbers during the 12 months to August last year, new figures show.

ABS union membership figures released today show half a million new employees were added to the private sector across Australia during the 12 month period, with union membership figures keeping pace with the growth. Private sector union membership remained steady at 13.8%, with an increase in raw numbers of 73,000.

ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence said uncertainty for Australian workers across a range of sectors meant belonging to a union was more important than ever before.

He said the importance of workplace representation was reinforced by figures showing that union members earned on average 12% more than non-members.

“Unions have achieved significant wins for workers in recent years, including the abolition of Work Choices and better rights of bargaining representation for workers through the Fair Work Act, and the introduction of paid parental leave,” Mr Lawrence said.

“Australian workers face continued uncertainty in the times ahead with structural changes to the economy and workforce as a whole.

“Upcoming challenges include the importance of raising the superannuation guarantee to 12%, ensuring equal pay for community sector workers, providing low-paid workers with a fair share of the economic prosperity through the upcoming minimum wage case and creating job security for the half of the workforce now in non-permanent employment.

“Since last August, when these ABS figures are taken up until, Australia has had a federal election and two state polls.

“Since those elections, the public sector workforce has become less secure, with the prospect of job cuts in next week’s federal Budget and reluctance by the NSW and Victorian governments to give workers a decent pay rise.

“The reality is unions get results, demonstrated in the continued income advantage between union members and non-union members. Union members earn on average \$124 a week more than non members.

“But union membership is about more than just protecting the income of workers; it is essential to ensure the protection of workers’ rights, their safety and their quality of life.

“Unions give workers a voice in the direction of the economy and society, and the ACTU is committed to enhancing that through the biggest ever survey of Australian workers now underway, the Working Australia Census 2011 ([www.workingaustralia.org.au](http://www.workingaustralia.org.au)).”

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