

Monsday, 3 October 2011

Insecure workers in Australia need a fairer deal for a better future, say unions

New rights that have been extended to temporary and agency workers in the UK from this month could provide a model for better treatment of insecure workers in Australia, say unions.

Under the UK's new equal treatment rights for temps laws, non-permanent staff will become entitled to rights like holiday pay and overtime pay after a short period of qualification with the same employer. The new rights in the UK began on 1 October.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said the plight of agency workers in the UK was similar to that of casual, labour hire and short-term contract workers in Australia – but the prevalence of insecure work was much more widespread here.

“About 40% of the Australian workforce have insecure jobs, and the number is growing,” Ms Kearney said. “Casual jobs, short-term contracts, labour hire and other forms of insecure work prevent people from properly planning for their future or managing their household.

“Insecure workers have no rights to paid sick or annual leave, no certainty about their income or whether they will have a job next week, and no career path or sense of belonging to a workplace.”

Last week the ACTU launched a major new national campaign to address the spread of casual, contract and other forms of insecure work in Australian workplaces.

Secure Jobs. Better Future is a campaign for better job security, improved rights and entitlements and a career path for the 40% of the Australian workforce in insecure jobs.

Ms Kearney said a crucial element of the campaign would be obtaining better rights and entitlements for insecure workers, and stronger enforcement of existing rights.

Under the changes in the UK, which came into effect on Saturday, agency temps will have the right to use all facilities provided by the hirer to permanent staff, and will also be entitled to information about internal vacancies at the company they are working for, and to be given the opportunity to apply for them.

After 12 weeks in the same role with the same hirer, agency workers will be entitled to the same pay, holiday leave and working hours as permanent staff, and will also receive improved maternity rights.

“We should be looking at similar improvements for casuals, labour hire and short-term contract workers here in Australia,” Ms Kearney said. “Insecure work is all about employers shifting costs onto workers, and it is spreading into sectors that were once seen as havens for permanent and secure jobs, like education, manufacturing and construction.

“If an economy as big as the UK can afford to do this and it's not seen as a risk to business, then there is no reason why it can't be done here in Australia. People can spend years in an insecure job, with unpredictable hours and volatile income, and with fewer entitlements, because this work suits the boss. It's time all workers had the choice of a job they can rely on.”

Australians can join the campaign for secure work at www.securejobs.org.au.

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