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Passage of paid parental leave scheme is an historic achievement for Australia's working mums

Australian working mothers will have better health and financial security after the historic passage of the first national paid parental leave scheme, say unions.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow said the passing of the Bill by the Senate today was the culmination of a 30-year campaign by working women and their unions.

She said the Rudd Government's 18-week scheme would be great for families and great for the economy by encouraging a higher participation rate of women in their most productive working years.

A new national standard that gives all women the right to take a period of paid leave will also be a major benefit to maternal and child health and development, she said.

"This is a truly great achievement for working women and the Rudd Government should be congratulated.

"It makes me immensely proud to be part of the Australian labour movement when we are able to deliver such important advances in working people's rights," Ms Burrow said.

"It is long overdue. Two-thirds of Australian women who have a baby currently get no paid parental leave. Parents have been forced to make a choice between having a child and paying the bills.

"The Rudd Government's scheme will finally overcome this long-time injustice for working families."

The passage of Australia's first national paid parental leave scheme comes after the ACTU and unions built a broad community and business consensus in support of the plan.

This week, the ACTU presented all political parties with a petition from more than 25,000 people urging the Senate to pass the Bill.

"Given Mr Abbott and the Liberals completely opposed a national paid parental leave scheme when they were in government, we were still worried they would hijack the scheme at the last minute," Ms Burrow said.

Ms Burrow said the ACTU and unions would build on this major reform with other measures to help women balance their work and family responsibilities and lead fulfilling lives.

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