

Thursday 10 February 2022

Senate must amend or reject Religious Discrimination Bill

The ACTU urgently calls on the Senate to remove all provisions from the Religious Discrimination Bill that increase discrimination and reduce existing protections for workers.

Whilst last night's amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act will finally end discrimination against students, the House of Representatives failed to ensure that teachers and school staff were afforded the same protections.

The 'statement of belief' provisions in the Bill will protect hateful, offensive, and inappropriate comments where they are based on religion. For example, LGBTQI+ workers may be deprived the right to complain about discrimination when hateful and homophobic statements are made about them, and women may lose the right to make complaints about hostile and sexist comments at work. These provisions of the Religious Discrimination Bill completely override hard fought protections in all other discrimination laws, both federal and state, that have been in place for decades.

The Bill also winds back other protections in state and territory laws, handing broad powers to employers to discriminate against staff in religious schools on the basis of the worker's religion, regardless of whether religion is required for their job.

Unions are concerned that workers will be at risk of repercussions from their employers if they speak up for themselves or seek union assistance under this bill, because it will enable employers to 'cloak' victimisation of workers as acts of religious freedom.

With only a handful of parliamentary sitting days before the election the Morrison Government is rushing through this ideological and poorly executed bill in a last-minute bid for votes.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil:

"With only a handful of days left in parliament before the election, the Morrison Government is desperately trying to rush through their complex, confusing and discriminatory Religious Discrimination Bill in a shameless attempt to fan division in workplaces and the community.

"Whilst the changes to the Sex Discrimination Act to protect students from discrimination is welcome and long overdue, the failure to protect teachers means that some schools will continue to be given a green light to discriminate, and LGBTQI+ students will be deprived the teaching role models they deserve.

"The statement of belief provisions will make it lawful to make harmful, offensive and discriminatory statements directed at LGBTQI+ people, women and those with disabilities, and it must be removed.

"The Morrison Government is attempting to override state and territory anti-discrimination laws with this bill – including in Victoria where LGBTQI+ teachers are currently protected from

discrimination, and in Tasmania where harmful 'statements of belief' are met with repercussions.

"The ACTU urgently calls on the senate to stop Australia's anti-discrimination laws going backwards enabling hate and division to flourish."

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