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Message to politicians - attack penalty rates at your peril

Over 60% of voters are less likely to vote for a candidate who supports reducing weekend or penalty rates, new Australian Unions research shows.

With Government legislation to bring back unfair individual contracts that will make it easier for bosses to scrap penalty rates due before the Senate this week, ACTU President Ged Kearney urged politicians to listen to the community.

“Australian voters do not want to see their representatives scrap penalty rates – and that figure rises dramatically when unions campaign on the issue,” Ms Kearney said.

“The national campaign to save weekend rates kicked off in Townsville a month ago and in that time the number of people who have said they would be less likely to vote for a candidate that supports reducing weekend or penalty rates has risen by over 15% to 62.2% according to a ReachTel poll conducted on 19 August of 773 people in the Townsville region.

“The fact is, hardworking Australians are not going to cop having their wages ripped out of their pockets.

“They’ll vote with their feet and find a party that supports penalty rates and working people.”

Ms Kearney said it is clear the Abbott Government is listening to calls by the business community to axe penalty rates and bring back unfair contracts.

“In recent days we’ve seen the powerful business lobby ramping up their public calls on the Government to attack rights at work and open the door for penalty rates to be scrapped.

“Despite the push by big business, public opinion is on the side of workers and Australian Unions will be campaigning strongly and loudly around the country to save weekend rates and protect rights at work.

“Millions of workers sacrifice their Sundays away from family and friends, they work nights and other unsociable hours, and they should be paid for that.

“Weekends are special – you don’t play the AFL Grand Final on a Tuesday morning, kids don’t go to school on weekends and we don’t see Parliament sitting on Sundays. The weekend is important to Australians.”

Ms Kearney said that the *Fair Work Amendment Bill* will strip current protections around individual flexibility agreements (IFAs) and make it easier for employers to force workers to forgo penalty rates.

“An IFA will allow an employer to pressure an employee to trade off their penalty rates or overtime in exchange for changes to their work arrangements, such as start and finish times.

“Hundreds of thousands of workers could be moved off safety net conditions onto IFAs with less pay and less conditions under a scheme that will make it virtually impossible for workers who are ripped off to recoup their losses.

“History tells us that under *WorkChoices*, individual contracts cut penalty rates for an estimated 65 percent of signed up workers, nearly 70 per cent lost annual leave and shift loading, half lost overtime and allowances and a quarter lost out on state and territory public holidays.

“We know that most people signing IFAs will do so under pressure to keep their jobs, particularly when starting a new job or to continue their employment.”

Ms Kearney said that like most of the Abbott Government’s agenda, these changes go way beyond what was flagged at the election.

“Mr Abbott didn’t present these plans to the public pre-election instead he promised that workers would benefit or, at least, not be worse off. He has no mandate for these changes,” Ms Kearney said.

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