

Workers campaigning for 10-days universal paid reproductive health leave

Australian unions are stepping up the movement's "It's For Every Body" campaign to secure ten days of universal paid leave so that workers can have time away and flexibility in dealing with a range of reproductive health issues.

The ACTU and the Queensland Council of Unions are in Canberra pressing for the expansion of the National Employment Standards to provide access to ten days paid reproductive health leave for workers.

Australian unions are also calling for reproductive health to be a reason that workers can request flexible work arrangements under the Fair Work Act and a protected attribute to safeguard against discrimination.

Entitlements to reproductive leave have been won by workers through their unions bargaining in the healthcare, finance, education, and the community sector. The Queensland Council of Unions led efforts to win the entitlement for public sector workers in that state.

Reproductive health issues include menstruation, pregnancy, contraception, miscarriage, perimenopause, menopause, chronic conditions such as poly-cystic ovarian syndrome and endometriosis, hormone therapy and fertility issues, as well as vasectomy, hysterectomy, terminations, and breast and prostate cancer screenings.

Women are withdrawing from the labour market years before they planned to, with less retirement savings, because of a lack of workplace support to address the symptoms of perimenopause and menopause, in particular.

Women are retiring seven years before men on average, and 12 years before their desired age of retirement, according to ABS data. Half of the women who retire under 55 report the reason they left work was due to their own sickness, injury, or disability.

The Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees estimates that menopause may cost women in the 50-54 age group more than \$15 billion per year in lost earnings and superannuation for every year of early retirement.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President, Michele O'Neil:

"The union movement's 'Its For Every Body' campaign recognises that reproductive health issues are having a significant impact on women, men and workplaces around the country every day.

"Women in particular, are retiring far earlier than they would have if the workplace offered better support to manage reproductive health issues so they could be supported to remain in work.

"The Queensland Government has recently introduced 10 days paid reproductive leave and we want to see this introduced as a right for all workers across Australia.

"The Liberal Party had made the ludicrous suggestion that this right will somehow make employers reluctant to hire women, when the whole point of this to ensure their talents and experience are not lost to the labour market.

"Whether it is unions campaigning for equal pay or paid parental leave – it is always a tough fight to win these conditions, but we need them so that women as well as men can balance work and care and stay in their jobs."

Quotes attributable to Queensland Council of Unions General Secretary, Jacqueline King:

"We need paid reproductive leave and flexible work arrangements in our National Employment Standards to ensure that all workers get access to these minimum standards rather than leave this to different workplaces to bargain for.

"For too long, generations of working women and men have had to show up to work in pain or juggle sometimes very personal, demanding treatments, without being able to share these problems simply because of current leave entitlements and stigma regarding reproductive health.

"The time has come for workplaces to recognise that all employees, regardless of gender, may need time or flexibility in how they work at some point in their working life to address symptoms or issues specific to their reproductive health.

“Work is part of a social contract between governments, employers, and our community. Part of that social contract is recognising that people have families. They also have reproductive health. And our workplaces need flexibility to accommodate those needs.

“We know that one in six Australian couples will undergo fertility treatment and one in seven men are affected by prostate cancer. We also know that women drop out of the workforce because of peri menopause and menopause at a rate much earlier than men, impacting their earnings as well as their superannuation balance at retirement.

“It’s time we have a mature conversation about how we can better support workers undergoing these kinds of treatments and issues alongside work, so that we can break down stigma and address these inequalities.

“Workers shouldn’t have to rely on the random lottery of finding an employer who supports their health and wellbeing with entitlements negotiated at the bargaining table.

“Reproductive health leave as a national employment standard will support a workforce which is happier, healthier, more productive and more inclusive.”

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