

Monday, 20 October 2025

Unions warn Coalition's attack on bargaining a risk to living standards

The ACTU warns that the Coalition's commitment to attack workers' bargaining rights would undermine Australian living standards, particularly for workers in low-paid sectors.

Opposition Leader Sussan Ley used a major speech today to commit to weakening the Albanese Government's collective bargaining laws by overturning multi-employer bargaining rights – the first clear industrial relations position announced by the Coalition since the federal election.

Workers on multi-employer agreements saw an average annual wage increase of 5.1 per cent in June 2025, meaning a worker on a multi-employer agreement is about \$1400 better off a year compared to an average worker.

Unions campaigned and won multi-employer bargaining rights in 2022 as part of the Federal Government's Secure Jobs Better Pay legislation. Multi-employer bargaining modernised outdated bargaining laws by supporting workers who were previously locked out of effective bargaining in low-paid sectors, such as early childhood education. The new rights also encouraged big employers like McDonald's to negotiate with their workforce across multiple franchises.

The independent review of the Secure Jobs Better Pay reforms found that the reforms are supporting wage growth, improving job security and closing the gender pay gap, with "minimal unintended consequences."

The latest Trends in Federal Enterprise Bargaining Report in September showed that 247,500 workers are on a current multi-employer agreement in June 2025, up from just 46,200 in December 2022. The report found that union-negotiated collective agreements delivered average annual wage increases of 4.2 per cent, compared to wage increases of 3 per cent under agreements where no unions were involved.

Unions reject the Opposition Leader's claim that multi-employer bargaining imposes a 'one-size-fits-all' model, noting that it exempts small businesses, includes a public interest test, and operates through defined streams requiring Fair Work Commission authorisation.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Secretary, Sally McManus:

"Working people and their employers now have more options to bargain for better outcomes thanks to the collective bargaining rights won by the union movement under the Albanese Government.

"The multi-employer bargaining laws include an exemption for small businesses, a public interest test and defined streams overseen by the Fair Work Commission. These rights have been effective and life-changing for hundreds of thousands of Australians who would otherwise be locked out of securing higher wages through collective bargaining.

"The Opposition Leader should well know that small businesses are exempt from the multi-employer bargaining laws. It's unfortunate but not surprising that Sussan Ley would rather protect the interests of big businesses like McDonald's, over the livelihoods of working people.

"Rolling back multi-employer bargaining will especially hurt workers in low-paid sectors, who are mainly women and young Australians. It will also weigh down on wage growth for everyone by weakening the wage floor.

"On top of cutting pay rises, the Opposition Leader also left open stripping rights from casual, labour hire and gig workers, which are other key demands of big business."

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Media Contact: Cameron Warasta (0447) 159 467