



“At this moment, with a widening gender pay gap and a conservative government making the challenge of inequality worse, the union movement is needed more than ever.”

Deputy Opposition Leader Tanya Plibersek had a rousing message to deliver when she addressed the ACTU National Women's Conference in Melbourne on 21 August. In her keynote speech she warned that on a number of fronts, women had already gone backwards under the Abbott Government.

Lockouts on the rise from militant bosses

by **MARK PHILLIPS**

ARE we seeing a new wave of lock out first, talk later aggression from employers?

Two lockouts in western Sydney in recent weeks have sparked concerns among unions of the emergence of a new brand of employer militancy, emboldened by the election of the Abbott Government.

On 25 August, 24 workers employed by building products manufacturer Ausreo walked back through the gates of their

Wetherill Park factory following the end of a 10 week lockout by the company. Ausreo had locked them out almost as soon as negotiations started for a new collective agreement.

Ten days earlier, about 50 workers at CSR Gyprock in the same suburb also returned to work after they too had been locked out for two weeks following industrial action in pursuit of a pay rise.

The two incidents, both so similar and in the same part of Sydney, appear to be part of a new approach by employers to

take a hardline, aggressive stance early on in negotiations as a strategy to break workers' spirits, said the NSW State Secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Tim Ayres.

“It's very clear that there's a growth in western Sydney of this sort of employer militancy, a sort of first resort to the lock out with no regard to what that means for the business interests of the firm, or their relationship with their employees after the dispute ends,” he said.

Continued page 4

Hall of Shame

When the mega-rich speak, does that mean we have to listen?

IT'S always gratifying when the seriously wealthy deign to tell us ordinary folk how to live our lives

After all, they should know . . . there must be a certain wisdom that comes with having to make hard decisions like whether to order the Chateau Mouton-Rothschild '78 or '82. These are seriously difficult problems that ordinary people never have to deal with.

Invariably, the prescription from the super-rich is to give the less wealthy a taste of bitter medicine, involving cuts to welfare payments and the public services they rely on. And if this means some fiscal slack is created to allow tax cuts for high income earners, well, so be it.

So when a billionaire offers some advice on how the poor should live, we should be grateful. We should listen.

Andrew 'Twiggy' Forrest has been offering this kind of advice for years.

Forrest – who according to the *BRW Rich List* is Australia's seventh wealthiest person with a fortune of \$5.86 billion mainly tied up in shares with the company he chairs, Fortescue Metals Group – is something of an anomaly among the mega-rich.

Most billionaires prefer to keep a low profile, rarely appearing in public and even more rarely being heard to speak.

But Forrest revels in his high profile and has taken it upon himself to be a latter day version of the benevolent ruling gentry, sprinkling charity here and there, but unyielding in his views about how the country should be run.

In Tony Abbott and the Coalition government, he has found a willing pair of ears. In August, the Government released its Indigenous Employment and Training Review, chaired by Forrest.

Going beyond his terms of reference, Forrest has provided a prescription for a radical overhaul of the entire welfare



Rich listeners: Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest at a rally in Perth against the Labor Government's Resource Super Profits Tax in 2010. Photo: Tony Ashby/AFP/Getty Images

system affecting all Australians.

Most controversial of all was the recommendation to expand income management – as was rolled out in the Northern Territory 'Intervention' by the Howard Government – to all working-age Centrelink clients. Never mind that this would be a recipe for entrenching further inequality in Australia.

What is particularly galling in the case of Andrew Forrest is that he himself has been a beneficiary of corporate welfare for years. He has admitted that in its early years, Fortescue did not pay a cent of tax as it recorded exploration losses on the way to developing its tenements.

Yet, when the previous Labor Government sought to introduce a resources profits tax to spread the benefits of the mining boom a little more evenly, Forrest was its most prominent critic.

What qualifies Andrew Forrest as an

expert on disadvantage is a mystery.

He likes to project the image of a self-made man. But for all his latter day charity towards the poor, Forrest has never really had to struggle for a cent in his life.

His privileged background and upbringing have always meant that doors have opened for him.

The truth is that Andrew Forrest is just one more voice out there, and his billions of dollars do not make his views any more valid than those of a single mum on a disability pension. His money has bought him a megaphone, but that does not mean we have to listen to it.

However well-meaning, he needs to be reminded that private philanthropy and charity is no substitute for government services and financial support to provide a safety net that ensures no citizen is left behind.

GET IN TOUCH

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Shipbuilding journeys cross through the generations

Thousands of jobs would be lost from shipyards in Adelaide and Melbourne if Navy ships and submarines do not continue to be made here. Neil Wilson spoke to two families who have been sustained by domestic shipbuilding

BLOOD may be thicker than seawater but both mix pretty well across generations for the **Van der Tuuks** of Adelaide.

Rob Van der Tuuk and son Corey are among those who have stepped forward to support the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union campaign to secure Australian shipbuilding, arguing we cannot plan a secure future submarine project without work guaranteed now for yards in all states.

Rob, 58, was one of the first boilermakers at ASC South in Adelaide five years ago and in recent times has been joined by Corey as the yard nears completing the first Air Warfare Destroyer.

Corey worked as an operator at ASC South for several years, on grinding and general duties, joining dad in the AMWU before being taken on as a mature-age apprentice electrician in 2013.

"I encouraged him to come here for the job security. He was a manager at Woolworths and hated it, but working at ASC South has changed his life," Rob says. "I'm as proud as punch he has the apprenticeship, I just want to make sure this industry can give him a future.

"For us it's about job satisfaction and we're proud to be building something of first-rate quality for Australia, better than you'd get being mass produced overseas."

Both wish local shipyards had the chance to prove they are capable of building the replacements for the navy's two supply ships, which has been offshored to Korea and Spain on a short-term cost basis by the Abbott Government.

Rob thinks it might have been inevitable that Corey eventually came to ASC, as there's a long shipbuilding bloodline in the family. Rob's father-in-law (Corey's



Above: the Van der Tuuks of Adelaide. **Below:** the Sturrocks of Williamstown.



grandfather) Syd Spence kept up a family tradition of work in East Belfast's famous Harland and Wolfe shipyards.

Then he worked at Whyalla shipyards after emigrating to Australia.

Father and son live in close suburbs, so travel to work together each day. Corey's boy Rylan is two and grandpa hopes fervently he may continue the tradition, so is fully backing the union's campaign to bring forward shipbuilding projects.

Corey said he loved the comradeship across trades, the supportive learning environment and the satisfaction from doing your best for Australia's defence.

"It's work that I hope will last for many years, we'll need the security – Rylan will have a little brother or a sister pretty soon now, we've got another due.

"It would be great if they come here to work one day."

THE **Sturrocks** have not only been building ships at Williamstown in Victoria for decades but also a proud family tradition – one they don't want abruptly ended by a shipyard in Korea or Spain.

Damian Sturrock, his brother Travis, dad Leigh and 3800 workers in the

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At Work

Lockouts on the rise from militant bosses

Continued from page one

“It’s really a mad strategy that just flies in the face of any ambition to have a constructive working relationship.”

Under section 411 of the Fair Work Act, employers are entitled to take industrial action of their own in response to action by workers.

But it is often used as a disproportionate response to minor industrial action by workers, most infamously when Qantas CEO Alan Joyce grounded the airline’s entire fleet in retaliation to work bans by ground staff and engineers.

Even pilots were locked out, despite their industrial action being no more threatening than wearing a red tie in defiance of management.

“I think there’s a fringe element particularly among the law firms that advise companies like this to look at things from the perspective of what their legal rights are and what the legal possibilities are rather than what’s the right strategy, how do we bring this difference between the parties to an end?” Mr Ayres said.

“There’s a sort of ultra-right employer law firm agenda here. I think it’s not

Continued from previous page

industry are worried after the recent shock decision by the Abbott Government to cut local yards out of building two navy replenishment ships.

“We wanted those ships, or at least most of those ships, to be built and outfitted here and I’m sure most Australians would like to see that,” said Damian.

“When you think of how many workers are building ships in yards across the country, the suppliers, the use of our taxpayer dollars, this is money that should be going into the Australian community.”

Damian and brother Travis learned their trade on the Anzac frigates and were already experienced boilermakers when their father Leigh came on board from the crane industry 15 years ago.

Damian leads the team which has completed the superstructure on the second – and last – Ambitious Assault Ship (also known as Landing Helicopter Dock or LHD) helicopter landing deck while brother Travis is responsible for



10 weeks out in the cold: Ausreo workers held firm for a fair deal.

helped by the political environment where the government is encouraging an adversarial approach. And of course the legal framework doesn’t provide many answers for people who find themselves in this position.”

Unions have long supported improved arbitration of intractable disputes to avoid situations where negotiations become a trial of strength, and particularly when employers are frustrating attempts to reach an agreement.

steel cutting.

After that they have more work on Air Warfare Destroyer blocks, but the future remains uncertain even if BAE Systems can get some of the 20 Pacific Patrol boats likely to be built locally.

Defence Minister David Johnston has falsely claimed the Australian industry wasn’t efficient enough or large enough to build the supply ships, but a Senate inquiry heard recently that yards in Adelaide and Perth could do the job with some conversion work.

Damian believes the wider industry and workforce have been unfairly caught in crossfire directed at ASC’s upper management in Adelaide.

He thinks the Government could have at least considered a joint build with Spain’s Navantia, similar to the present LHD project at Williamstown in Victoria.

“I was sent to Germany for part of my apprenticeship when we built the Anzac frigates and I saw then our standards are definitely just as high as Europe,” he said.

“The risk is we’ll repeat the mistake

“There’s limited capacity for arbitration for workers who find themselves locked out,” Mr Ayres said.

“It’s not a very good system when a group of low wage workers in western Sydney are locked out for 10 weeks for no observable purpose

“There’s no great issues at stake, it’s an employer who’s just determined to hold back a wage increase. There’s no conceivable good reason why employers should be allowed to behave or conduct themselves in this way.”

where the shipbuilding companies get rid of workers, then when they have to re-hire in future the skills won’t be there. We need consistent work.”

Leigh, 66, is an apprentice mentor at Williamstown and likes the idea his grandkids – Damian’s children Hunter, 6, and Willow, 2 – could one day work there.

“I was a boilermaker for a long time, a fair bit of that in a management or foreman type of role in the crane industry, and I’ve come to appreciate how specialised shipbuilding skills are,” he said.

“BAE is a great place to work, Damian talks about building vessels to defend the nation and he’s absolutely right – you don’t send that to be done overseas.”

Their dad’s arrival was a chance for Travis and Damien to return some of the good advice he gave them around the kitchen table during their apprenticeships.

“I’ve had the chance to work closely with each of them on different occasions, I can be a hard judge but I’m really proud of the skills they have, at team leader level,” Leigh said.

Jokes aside, scheme unites action on jobs and climate

by **DAVE KERIN**

IF someone told you a joke which started: “A conservative, small manufacturer, a 40-year militant union veteran and Father Bob Maguire walked into a bar . . .” you’d want to know the punchline.

Well, what if it’s not a bar, but rather a not-for-profit, workers’ co-operative manufacturing green technologies? Serious, yeah?

And what sort of vision could it be which unites not just the above unlikely trio, but also brings together CFMEU Mining Division members and Quit Coal, Labor and National voters and pretty much all of the green activist and advocacy organisations?

To begin to answer these questions it must be said that, just the fact that there is still an available, unifying vision in today’s world is hopeful. And that such a vision is being driven out of Victorian union activists says much about Earthworker Cooperative.

Another testament to the widespread support for Earthworker is its recent crowdfunding drive. While the drive was constrained to a brief two week-long effort, Australians donated \$78,500!

Earthworker is a community-led initiative working to provide local, sustainable, wealth-creating jobs that will contribute to a healthy planet and a safe climate. Our mission is to respond to the challenges of climate change and the need for local job creation, by facilitating the establishment of worker-owned cooperatives throughout Australia in sustainability-focused industries.

We are pioneering a business model which incorporates Enterprise Bargaining Agreements. This approach establishes a collective market for household solar hot water that will both support sustained demand for our locally-made systems, and provide access to money-saving solar energy for thousands of households across the country.

As part of their wage increase a worker can purchase a solar hot water unit for their own, their parents’ or their children’s



Hot stuff: Earthworker’s Dave Kerin checks over a hot water pump newly installed for community housing run by the Father Bob Maguire Foundation.

house, using either their mortgage or a special, Earthworker interest rate offered by bankmecu, the co-operative bank.

A university, a city council and a large community agency are the first three workplaces to agree to include the Earthworker program in their EBAs as an optional choice for their employees.

Apart from the immediate benefit to workers and their families in the three EBAs Earthworker is currently in, there are a number of other benefits to Australia generally, which are all about the values of the union movement:

MANUFACTURING jobs which never leave our shores;

A DEVELOPMENT pathway into the full range of renewable and energy producing goods;

TRAINING for our young;

PRACTICAL steps in dealing with climate emergency;

INDIGENOUS jobs in every intake of worker-owners – practical treaty work;

YOUNG women into the trades;

5% of surplus from all viable factories towards social justice through the Father Bob Maguire Foundation.

So, when your next EBA is up, speak

to your employer about inserting an Earthworker Clause.

Or, if you know people who for whatever reason cannot access an EBA, but who want to purchase through the co-operative, they can join Earthworker Cooperative and become an Earthworker and receive the same deal an EBA worker gets with bankmecu.

Earthworker membership fees are a form of micro-financing, and will be used to purchase factory equipment.

Our first step is the establishment of Eureka’s Future, a worker-owned factory in Morwell, in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley. Eureka’s Future will produce and install high-quality Australian-made solar hot water systems – providing much needed jobs for the coal-dominated Latrobe Valley community, and producing renewable energy systems that reduce household energy use and costs.

Each year that micro-financing capital grows, making the purchase of factory equipment for the new co-operative factories we intend to open in each state and territory.

Dave Kerin is an organiser at Earthworker

The Greg Combet interview

WHEN Greg Combet announced last June that he was pulling the pin on his career as a Member of Parliament and retiring from political life, it was met with widespread anguish throughout the union movement.

With the Labor Government facing the inevitability of a landslide loss to the Coalition, Mr Combet was viewed by many as the best hope of uniting the progressive side of politics and taking the fight up to Tony Abbott.

His announcement was met with confusion, sadness, and in some cases, anger from people who could not understand why one of the most respected labour leaders of the past quarter of a century was walking away in the hour of greatest need.

In truth, Mr Combet was spent. His passion to carry on the fight, and his intellect, were undimmed. But 25 years of living, breathing and eating his work, fighting battle after battle, had taken its toll on his health.

For his own wellbeing, it was time to move on.

IT is now well over six months since Greg Combet retired from Parliament following six years as the Member for Charlton in the Hunter Valley, four of them as a senior member of the government during which he introduced a price on carbon emissions; seven years as Secretary of the ACTU; and more than a quarter of a century in the maelstrom of industrial relations and labour politics.

He has a few part-time roles which keep him busy around the country, including chairman of the South Australian government's Automotive Transformation Taskforce.

He has moved back to Sydney to live.

And he has co-written a book with his former press secretary, Mark Davis, *The Fights of My Life*, which was officially launched in Sydney on 29 July.

Although a keen student of labour history himself, Mr Combet said he had resisted overtures to write a book while he was in public life, believing it was inappropriate to do so, and has never been the type to keep a diary.

His attitude has always been to look



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Greg Combet has been a warrior for the labour movement for a quarter of a century, and now has written a memoir of his involvement in some of the most important fights of our time. He spoke to Working Life editor Mark Phillips

forward to the next task or challenge.

But writing the book has allowed him the time to reflect on the meaning of some of the great fights of his time in the labour movement.

“One of the things I’ve realised over the years is there’s very little of our history written by people who’ve been involved in things and that was a key reason I decided ultimately to do the book,” he says.

“There was a personal element, a cathartic thing to get it out after I’d finished a long period as a union official and a Labor politician but mainly I wanted some of the things I’ve been privileged to be involved in, I want them to be known and recorded and for people to be proud of what they’ve done.”

WHILE Mr Combet has written about his most recent experiences as a senior

Labor government minister, he says about three-quarters of the book is about his involvement in the union movement, which dates back to the late-1970s.

He recalls his earliest days when he worked in the underground coal industry while a uni student, at a workers’ health centre run by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union in Lidcombe, and then at the Waterside Workers Federation under the tutelage of the late Tas Bull, who Mr Combet describes as a personal hero.

From Tas Bull, Mr Combet says learnt “you’ve just got to buckle down and be incredibly tough to win things when you’re fighting for working class people.”

And this is the overarching message that Mr Combet hopes to get across through his book: “nothing is achieved without fighting for it and defending it. And you’ve got to fight for it again and again.”

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Photo: Greg Noakes/ACTU

It is a message that has strong resonance at a time when the union movement is fighting numerous battles to protect jobs, oppose the dismantling of the social wage, defend the minimum wage, penalty rates and other conditions, and even preserve their role as independent representatives of working people.

Mr Combet says the union movement should be very proud of what it has contributed to Australia, but the battle to protect those gains is never-ending.

"It's very important in our democracy. It is a mass movement of a couple of million people . . . It's helped shape this country and its values.

"But it doesn't happen by magic. It's not sprinkled from above somehow, it's built by grassroots activism, and around a set of values: fairness, justice, equality of opportunity, democracy, individual and collective rights, all these things are critical to having a decent society."

Read more:

workinglife.org.au

James Hardie was a matter of life and death

OF all the many fights over his quarter of a century of involvement in the labour movement, none makes Greg Combet prouder than the battle for justice for victims of James Hardie's asbestos products.

To Mr Combet, the James Hardie campaign was personal. Over the years, he had come face-to-face with many victims of asbestos-related diseases like mesothelioma.

He had seen the impact of asbestos on people's lives during his early days in the union movement in a workers' health centre in Lidcombe and with the Waterside Workers' Federation.

"This is a really bad way to die. Asbestosis is ugly, you gradually just lose your lung capacity," he says.

"Mesothelioma is a terrible cancer to die from. It'd always made me angry. So when this came along, it was a very emotional fight."

"This" was the ploy by James Hardie to shift assets offshore so that they were beyond the reach of Australian victims seeking compensation for diseases caused by its asbestos products.

Mr Combet is proud of the Hardie campaign for a number of reasons, but most importantly, it reflected all the values he had learnt during his many years with unions.

"It's about life and death – it's people's lives and how they can be destroyed by corporate malfeasance.

"They knew for decades and decades they were producing a product that killed people and they hid it, avoided liability for compensation as long as

possible and it ultimately culminated in their attempts to shift all their assets overseas and separate them from the Australian victims who would be seeking compensation in years to come.

"And it outraged me so much that we just fought them with a ferocity."

Lacking the financial and legal firepower of the Hardie company, Mr Combet realised the battle had to be won in the field of public opinion first.

It was in the campaign for hearts and minds that the late Bernie Banton was so important, Mr Combet says.

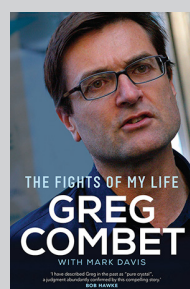
Not only was Mr Banton, who died from asbestos-related diseases in 2007, a forceful advocate for the cause and a key part of the unions' communications strategy, but he also sat in on tense negotiations with Hardie's lawyers.

"The Hardies people all the time were trying to divert the discussion, make it legalistic and all the rest, and I was able to just point down the table and say, 'Well, tell that to Bernie, will you'. And he'd just bring them back to earth," Mr Combet says.

History records that James Hardie was brought to justice and a sustainable fund was established to compensate future victims.

"The Hardies campaign really was a special thing for me, it was a bit of a personal crusade for many of us who were involved in it and we brought the company to justice against all the odds.

"Basically, we had nothing going for us except the force of moral suasion, and we brought them to justice . . . I was really proud of that."



SPECIAL READER OFFER

Courtesy of Melbourne University Publishing, *Working Life* readers can take advantage of a special offer and purchase a discounted copy of Greg Combet's *The Fights of My Life*.

Simply go to the MUP website and enter the promo code 'unions20' to gain your 20% discount on the cover price of \$32.99.

Website: www.mup.com.au/items/147303

My Working Life

Man of steel battles to save Australian jobs and industry

“I started at Laverton about 23 years ago. It was Smorgon Steel at the time, but now it’s OneSteel. I’d been at North Meat in Katherine and that became part of the Mudginberri dispute, that was a difficult time for all involved. We had a four month picket line. At the end of all that I came back to Melbourne.

I had an acquaintance from the meat industry days who was working here at Laverton. I knew it was time for a change and he reckoned it wasn’t bad, so I gave it a go. He gave me the leg up and I’ve never looked back. I’ve never been afraid of hard work.

My father taught me to have pride in my job.

He always said you should leave a place in better condition than it was when you got there. He also told me that you had to be part of the union, and I always have been.

They asked me on the first day if I wanted to join the AWU. “Of course,” I said. There was never any doubt for me.

I worked in the melt shop for five or six years as a steel maker on the 90 tonne furnace.

Then I moved into the rolling mills because I saw that as an opportunity. I was involved in writing safe working procedures and assessing risk. I’d been a health and safety rep since my second year at Laverton, just as I was throughout my time in the meat industry.

I’d been here about 15 years when my work colleagues and senior management voted me up as Safety Co-ordinator for the site. Management at that time saw the benefit of having someone who knew the industry, knew what we do here and all the processes.

I look after health and safety on-site and that includes psychological health as well as physical.

I’m involved with rehab after someone’s had an injury, and I make sure that anyone who is seriously ill, and not necessarily work-related, has what they need. I give advice and do a bit of counselling. I also am the EEO contact at Laverton.



Paul Spear is an Australian Workers’ Union health and safety representative at OneSteel Laverton near Melbourne, where he oversees all the other HSRs. OneSteel Laverton has the ability to make 700,000 tonnes a year, but is at the moment is running at 450,000 tonnes a year

I was at the steel rally at Webb Dock today [5 August] because I am trying to look after 400 families.

I’ve got 400 workmates and members here who want to look after their loved ones. They’ve already taken a big knock because the steel orders aren’t there.

It is insanity that infrastructure projects being built with our taxpayer dollars are not using local products.

Look at us here. We use 100% recycled scrap to make steel. We’re cleaning up the environment, and making world class product to world class specifications.

We’ve lost 30 people to redundancy in the past few months, and everyone’s taken a pay cut of around \$20,000 or \$25,000 because now instead of being a seven days a week, 24 hour operation, we’ve gone to Monday to Friday.

People have to rethink everything. Where their kids go to school, where they live, how they’re going to retire one day.

The AWU is a good union. They have the fights they have to have, and this fight for the steel industry is one of those.

I think the training opportunities the AWU gives to health and safety reps and delegates are excellent.

It was through the union, and Smorgon’s, that I did my Cert IV in OHS and went on to do a graduate diploma.

Unions and employers can work together for better outcomes and this place has proved that to me.

I worry about the future for my grandson. He’s only young now, but what am I going to advise him to do for a living? Will he drive a tourist bus on the Great Ocean Road? I don’t know.

They say they want people with trades, but what’s the point if manufacturing is dead? What are our children and our grandchildren going to do? No-one seems to be able to answer me that.

These governments, state and federal, who don’t want to buy Australian steel, and glass, and aluminium, all the rest of it, what are they thinking?

It’s a no-brainer. We need jobs. ”

Interview by Mary McNamara

The business case to cut wages just doesn't add up



by **GED KEARNEY**
ACTU President

THE business case to change workplace laws and scrap penalty rates has been blown out of the water by recent economic data.

Business groups including the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Australian Industry Group regularly cite overheated wages, wage explosions, wage breakouts – whatever they choose to call it – as the rationale for workplace changes.

Yet figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics this month show wages are growing slowly, so there is no economic pressure for change.

Wage growth has hit a record low of 2%. Private sector wage growth is a very low 2.4% – the lowest growth figure since data started being collected in 1997. Similarly, full-time adult average weekly earnings increased by just 2.4% – again well below inflation. Put simply, wages are not keeping up with inflation, which means real wages and living standards are falling.

The data clearly refutes employer claims that the Fair Work Act causes unsustainable and inflexible wage growth. Instead, we have seen economic growth slow and wage restraint kick in.

Yet despite the evidence, ACCI's chief operating officer John Osborn claims the figures demonstrate the need to cut wages even further by overhauling the awards system to cut weekend penalty rates.

It completely defies all logic and demonstrates the kind of alternative reality employer groups are living in.

The economic figures show their relentless campaign for workplace change for what it is – ideological. Wages growth is at a record low and unemployment at a 12 year high of 6.4%. Yet what is ACCI's answer? To cut wages even further.

Attacking penalty rates and failing to pay a decent wage cuts their discretionary spending and causes anxiety as they struggle to cope with living expenses. A



“ It completely defies all logic and demonstrates the kind of alternative reality employer groups are living in

pay cut means they re-evaluate their budget and forgo a takeaway lunch, a coffee or a pair of shoes.

If business groups strip away wages they will find customers are spending less money in their establishments – employers will have no one to blame but themselves for driving down their own profits and damaging already shaky consumer confidence.

An ME Bank survey this month shows ordinary Australian families are experiencing increasing financial pressure

with 54% reporting they are unable to save money from their weekly budget.

The survey clearly shows that many families are struggling and their wage are not keeping pace with family costs. A large number of these families rely on penalty rates to pay their bills and feed their families.

These are people who are working the hours that often no-one else wants: weekends, public holidays and the midnight shift. They miss out on time with family and friends, Sunday catch ups and public holiday barbecues. They work shift hours that have an impact on their health and wellbeing and sleep unnatural hours. They deserve compensation and that's what the penalty rates give them.

Continued next page

Life

Songs of power, songs of hope

by MARK PHILLIPS

SONG has long been one of the most potent weapons in the labour movement's armoury.

Whether it be the rousing singalong of 'Solidarity Forever', Bruce Springsteen's low-key 'Factory (the Working Life)', or the hymn-like South African anthem, 'Nkosi sikeleli I'Afrika', music and song has inspired and united multiple generations of working people in their struggles against oppression and inequality, and their fights for justice and freedom.

The enduring power of songs like 'We Shall Not Give Up the Fight' or 'The Internationale' means they are still heard on picket lines and at protests today.

Music is part of the labour movement's tradition . . . but like many traditions, it is in danger of being lost in today's frenetic, hyper-connected, and live-for-the-moment society.

The Victorian Trade Union Choir is swimming against that tide. It is a busy and active group that is determined to pass on the tradition of song to new generations.

Formed in 1990, the VTUC is a regular sight at rallies, protests, strikes, marches, and events like Workers' Memorial Day.

Two years ago, the choir's musical director, Michael Roper, got together with playwright and director Rebecca Lister to conceive an hour-long show based around its repertoire.

More than just a concert, *I'll Be There* is a cabaret-style show that weaves 16 songs into personal stories from the choir members singing them.

The show was first debuted at the Melbourne Trades Hall in 2012, and later



United in voice: The Victorian Trade Union Choir during a performance of *I'll Be There*.

performed at Melbourne's legendary La Mama Theatre.

Now, after successfully raising \$5000 through a Pozible campaign, the VTUC is taking the show on the road in regional Victoria.

Mr Roper said the intention behind *I'll Be There* was to place the songs in a human context through choir members telling stories about their own working lives and experiences as union members.

"We have found that when we sing our songs, they have a certain impact, especially traditional songs like 'The Internationale' or 'Solidarity Forever'," he said. "The words actually don't date, they talk about things that are continual issues that come up for people year after year after year.

"By giving a personal context, the choir member is telling about some part of their life, and then singing the song,

we're drawing the connection much more directly between the meaning of the words and this person's life.

"Really, what we're trying to do, and it has been successful, is we're trying to explain what unionism is, but explain it by this is the life of this person and this person and this person."

Ms Lister agrees that the importance of the show lies in making the experience of unionism accessible to the audience through songs and stories.

"We're hoping that it enables people to understand the long and rich history of the union movement and the working life of this country.

"So many of us the way that we work and operate is based on what went before us [such as] the eight hour working day, and I think a lot of those stories have the potential to be lost so we're hoping to keep them alive and relevant."

Continued from previous page

Why do employers want to hurt the people who make them profitable?

Meanwhile, business benefits greatly from staff availability. They can open their doors longer and often experience their most profitable, highest turnover days on Sundays and public holidays.

These employees are integral to the success of a business and yet employer groups are calling for the

Productivity Commission inquiry into the Fair Work Act to be fast tracked and pushing their campaign to attack penalty rates and cut people's wages.

Instead of engaging in a debate involving the cold hard economic facts, employer groups are attempting to manipulate public opinion with claims that penalty rates are no longer needed in the modern 24 hour economy.

Yet a national surveys consistently show that Australians support the

notion that if you work on weekends, you should be entitled to compensation through penalty rates.

Unions understand that increased prosperity benefits workers as much as it does business owners. So by all means, let us debate the issues but it must be a debate based on facts. We must be wary of employer lobby groups cloaking ideology in policy and trumpeting "solutions" to problems that do not really exist.

Sexual harassment is not your fault and should not be tolerated



by **RIGHTS WATCH**

Both your immediate boss and the actual company can get into trouble for allowing sexual harassment to continue

'R' writes: Please don't identify me. My partner is being sexually harassed in her workplace. The mostly male workforce talk openly about their sex lives and demean my partner on a daily basis. Her boss is not supportive, and sometimes joins in with the harassment. Is it possible to join a union anonymously as she works for a large company and has been advised not to join the union "as it may cause issues" at work.

I am so sorry your partner is having to put up with this behaviour. Sexual harassment can take many forms including "jokes" and overtly sexual conversation in front of people who are clearly not comfortable with it, ongoing personal comments about someone's appearance, right up to inappropriate physical contact.

My first thought would normally be to tell the people having these conversations that she feels uncomfortable (sometimes people don't realise their humour and conversation, which they themselves thought innocuous is offensive to others) but she has clearly already done that – to no avail.

That she has complained to her boss and he refuses to act, in fact joins in, is especially reprehensible. Does her boss have a boss? If so (and that would be very likely as you say it

is a large company) she might want to explore making a complaint in writing to him or her.

It's important that she keep a copy of any letter she writes about this. In fact, she should start diarising everything if she hasn't already. It's also possible there is a policy in place about bullying and harassment. Is there an employee manual or an agreement which outlines anything? If there is and her immediate boss is clearly in breach of it, the company must act.

Above all it's important for her to remember that none of this is her fault. Sexual harassment is against the law and her employer (both her boss and the actual company) can get into trouble for allowing it to continue. It is everybody's right to go to work and know they can go about their day free from this sort of behaviour and ongoing humiliation.

One more thing, it is also unlawful to prevent anyone from joining a union. In my opinion it is also true that if a boss actively discourages people from becoming a member, there's probably a very good reason behind it – they don't want their workers to have the protection a union provides.

A good employer wouldn't care one way or another if there is a union on site – they have nothing to fear from a union as they do the right thing by their staff.

What are my rights to say no to shifts as a casual worker?

REBECCA asks: Just a quick question about casual work. If I need to take a shift off I am entitled to take it, right?

As a casual worker you have no guarantee of shifts, as you know.

This is why you're paid the casual loading – to make up for the insecurity and lack of paid holidays and sick leave.

In theory, this flexibility is meant to go both ways – your boss is free not to roster you on and you are free to turn down a shift if you have something else planned.

In practice though, it can be difficult to change or turn down work without causing friction.

It's a good rule of thumb to give as much notice as possible about changing or cancelling a shift on your roster.

Perhaps you can arrange to swap with someone else so the hours are covered (a word

of caution though, you might want to run it by your employer first; in my experience sometimes it's not looked on favourably to make your own arrangements without an official okay first).

Whatever you do, make sure you do let work know that you can't come in.

Tempting though it might be to avoid the risk of your request for a night off to be turned down, it's just asking for trouble to not show up at all – you wouldn't like to turn up at work and find out you weren't needed and no one had bothered to tell you; similarly your boss is entitled to know their rostered staff will be at work.

If you ask for a roster change and you have any problems as a result why don't you give the Australian Unions team a call on 1300 486 466? They can discuss with you what action you might be able to take.

I hope it all works out for you and you get the night off!

GOT A PROBLEM AT WORK?

You've come to the right place. Share your workplace issues with our other readers and get free advice from the Australian Unions helpline if you have a problem with your pay, entitlements, health and safety or anything else at work.

Phone **1300 4 UNION (1300 486 466)**.

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