



AUSTRALIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY

ACCI Workplace Policy Director Peter Anderson on ABC Radio's PM Program - 1 December 2005 - National Wage Case

Qld unions launch wage case

Reporter: Melanie Christiansen

MARK COLVIN: In a bid to get around the new Federal industrial relations laws, the union movement's come up with a new strategy for achieving wage increases.

In every state, the unions have applied to their state industrial relations commissions for a four per cent pay rise for low paid workers.

The first of those state wage cases began this afternoon in Queensland.

The unions say workers will face an 18-month wage freeze if they have to wait for the new Fair Pay Commission to decide on any increase.

But employer groups accuse the unions of playing short-sighted industrial politics, as Melanie Christiansen reports.

MELANIE CHRISTIANSEN: The Queensland Council of Unions admits its wages claim in the State Industrial Relations Commission, the first of a series state wages claims to be heard around the country, is a direct response to the Federal Government's new industrial relations laws.

General-Secretary Grace Grace.

GRACE GRACE: Normally, we wouldn't make an application until after the Australian Industrial Relations Commission has made a national wage case decision, which we flow on to workers in this State, which means that they get their increase from 1 September, say next year, which is a 12-month period.

But because of the new industrial relation law changes, we're very concerned about, you know, the role of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. So the Labour councils around the country got together, and like we've decided that we're not going to wait for these laws to take effect.

There are many Queensland workers who deserve a pay increase and that we are going to file to ensure that these Queensland workers get their pay increase from 1 September next year.

MELANIE CHRISTIANSEN: Although nationally the ACTU is also pursuing a four per cent

wage claim through the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, Grace Grace says it's not certain workers can rely on that going ahead.

GRACE GRACE: The difficulty we have with that is that Federal Government is submitting to the commission that they should not hear that application, because the new legislation is coming in and the Australian Fair Pay Commission will now have the new role of setting that wage increase.

MELANIE CHRISTIANSEN: The unions are concerned. If the next wage increase is left to the new Fair Pay Commission to decide, workers could be waiting 18 months to two years for pay rise. Employers, though, dispute that.

Peter Anderson is Director of Workplace Policy at the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

PETER ANDERSON: That's both wrong and completely short-sighted.

The union movement has the ink hardly dry on the last wage increases, and with the ink hardly dry, it expects Australian employers to be facing claims through the back door of state industrial tribunals for more wage increases.

There's been nothing said by the trade union movement in the past six months that would contribute to one new job being created in Australia.

It has been a farrago of negativity about industrial relations changes and what we are seeing now is an attempt to try and play industrial politics with the changes that are occurring at a Federal level.

MELANIE CHRISTIANSEN: The National Retailers Association is also angry.

CEO Patrick McKendry says the state wage claims are irresponsible.

PATRICK MCKENDRY: What on earth are we doing in a national, globalised economy, with these state bodies now determining for the first time in decades, state wage outcomes.

It has been the history of industrial relations wage fixation in this country that the national commission would fix it... would fix the outcome and the states would flow. Now they're trying to reverse it.

Are they trying to reverse it for sound, meritorious reasons or are they trying to reverse it for political reasons? I think the latter. I think from their perspective they think that will add to their campaign to create confusion and apprehension about the new Federal legislation.

MELANIE CHRISTIANSEN: But Grace Grace says the Queensland Council of Unions will do whatever's necessary to ensure low paid workers get a much needed wage rise.



GRACE GRACE: I think when you look at the cost of fuel, the cost of goods that we're purchasing, four per cent is not an unreasonable amount and we're not prepared to wait 18 months, two years, for another commission to hand down a decision which delays the increase for, we're talking here, the lowest paid workers in Queensland.

MARK COLVIN: The General-Secretary of the Queensland Council of Unions, Grace Grace, ending that report from Melanie Christiansen.