



"Bargains must be drawn by both sides" - Opinion Piece
by
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As the father of a seven-year-old and a five-year-old, I know the importance of a good balance between work and family.

Employers share the interests of all Australians in the creation and maintenance of stable families and in the contribution family life makes to Australian society.

A sterile debate has been running during the past week following the Chamber of Commerce and Industry statement that "work and family" is not the No 1 industrial relations issue in Australia. Although we have been attacked by the labour movement for stating this, we do not resile from what we have said. Jobs are the most important issue in industrial relations today.

Last week's unemployment figures for Australia recorded an increase in the unemployment rate to 6.2 per cent. That is 627,000 Australians without a job. Australians have been too complacent about this level of unemployment.

The good news is the same approach needed to help get unemployment down – a flexible workplace relations system allowing employers and employees freedom to make agreements that suit their circumstances - is also the best solution to getting the work and family balance right. Unfortunately, most union officials do not understand this. They want new, costly rights, not better workplace relationships. These rights will discourage employers from employing more young women and mothers, not encourage it. Work is a valid source of personal fulfilment and social identity and underpins the living standards of many Australian families. The extent to which work is available in the economy, however, is a function of investment and risk-taking, the cost of labour, productivity, customer demand and profitability.

Successful businesses need to balance what can sometimes be the differing demands between the overall needs of an enterprise and of the individuals employed within it.

While many workplaces have adopted flexible, creative and mutually beneficial working arrangements which incorporate family-friendly provisions, many other employers, and here I am mainly talking about small or even "micro" businesses, are simply not in an economic position to meet unreasonable union requests.

If family-based measures are imposed on employers who cannot absorb them without detriment to their businesses, the loss in flexibility and productivity will result in higher costs, reduced competitiveness, reduced investment and job losses.

In that sense, any debate about work and family must put these issues into a real life, real world workplace context.

ACCI and its member organisations, which include Business SA, have identified eight guiding objectives through which better long-term work and family outcomes can be achieved.

The two key objectives are the recognition that jobs are the top priority and that one size does not fit all.

The so-called "work and family" test case just brought by the ACTU before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission offends both these key objectives. Small businesses, in particular, are alarmed at the severe imposition on their costs that the ACTU is arguing for.

Part of the claim is to extend the present award provision for 12 months' unpaid parental leave (which employers have long accepted) to two years, with an option to extend to between five and six years. This one-size-fits-all approach takes no account of the stretched resources of small businesses.

Small business is also greatly concerned about proposals to "create" a right to part-time work when a mother returns from maternity leave.

While many readers will have the automatic reaction that this may be a reasonable request, its imposition would strike at the heart of the employment relationship and the ability to effectively run a business. The irony here is that business doesn't in any way oppose part-time work.

In fact, employers have been fighting for years for more flexible workplace arrangements like part-time work and have been opposed by unions such as the CFMEU (the construction union).

Bargaining over work and family involves a mutual exchange, and some employers who choose to bargain on work and family issues may seek reciprocal changes from employees. While there is no magic solution to the work and family question, Australian business is committed to working with all stakeholders to improve the lives of working Australians.