

Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committees on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

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Australia

Submission to the Inquiry into the Fair Work Amendment (Small Business-Penalty Rates Exemption) Bill 2012

For over 20 years we have seen a persistent push on the part of employers' groups, the conservative coalition, the Murdoch style press, and various neoliberal 'personalities' to undermine the wages and conditions of Australian workers. According to Greg Sheridan in The Australian some years back, the workers' movement has been nothing more than 'one hundred years of idiot trade unionism'. What he and other ideologues wish for is to turn back the clock by over 100 years so that workers work for whatever wages and conditions employers wish to give them. Now Senator Xenophon has joined the push, which is a pity because some of the things he has stood for have been worthwhile.

One of the great achievements in the great civilizing work of the labour movement was the eight hour day. This allowed working people to live their lives with some comfort, dignity, and time to spend in leisure pursuits and with their families. Work outside of 'sociable' hours, it was recognised, was sometimes unavoidable, but had to be

compensated for with penalty rates.

For some time now, some employers and their political supporters have been trying to take this away. Underlying their campaign is the Thatcherite ideology that there is no such thing as society and all that is important is the economy -- viz their interests. The other factor here is that some workers have such a low base rate of pay that they can only make something like a decent income by working overtime. Some employers also demand that their employees work overtime. Their right to do so has been a locus of ongoing dispute. The old Metal Trades Award, thus, used to include the clause that employees were expected to work 'reasonable overtime'. From personal experience, I know that there could be strong disagreement over what this meant. Indeed, more than one employer tried to sack me because I refused to work at the weekends and argued that two hours overtime on weekdays was reasonable enough. It would be completely unreasonable of it were to be paid at the non overtime rate.

I call upon all Senators to throw out Senator Xenophon's proposal. By doing so, they will stand up for the rights and dignity of working people, their living standards, and their rights to enjoy private and social life, and to be compensated when expected to work unsociable hours. You would also be making the point strongly that there is more to life than the needs of the economy, and that society and the needs of people are paramount.

Thank you.

Dr John Tully

Submitted by

John Tully

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