

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the Workplace Relations Amendment (WorkChoices) Bill 2005

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The Social Action Office (SAO) of the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes, Queensland (CLRIQ) is deeply concerned with the brevity of this inquiry. It has taken some of the best legal minds in the country over five months to draft this legislation from broad principles yet the inquiry into the 1200 page document is scheduled for only four or five days – not enough time to read it let alone sensibly inquire into the impacts of the so-called reforms. Other equally contentious legislation before Parliament (the anti –terrorism bill of some 137 pages) has been granted a three week inquiry due to substantial and ongoing concerns. Given the apparent extra complexity of the Workplace Relations Bill of some 670 pages plus explanatory notes, an inquiry of around 15 weeks would seem fair – in order to truly ensure the fairer system the Government has repeatedly told the Australian people that we need, in its \$55 million taxpayer funded advertising campaign. If fairness is the aim, as the Government purports, then a substantial four month inquiry is necessary.

The work of the Social Action Office is thoroughly grounded in Catholic Social Teaching and so is concerned with the dignity of the human person. These teachings offer “a set of principles for reflection, criteria for judgement and directives for action” (*John Paul II Sollicitudo Rei Socialis – 1988# 41*)

While the Church teaches us that the right to work is primary this right also exists within a social context; the right to a just wage, the right to organise and associate freely, the right and the obligation of the individual and the collective to contribute to the Common Good. Unions therefore play an important role in upholding the rights of workers but also in contributing to the Common Good.

Although ... democratic societies today accept the principle of labour union rights, they are not always open to their exercise. The important role of union organisations must be admitted: their object is the representation of the various categories of workers, their lawful collaboration in the economic advance of society and the development of their sense of their responsibility for the realisation of the common good.

Pope Paul VI, Octogesima Adventiens #14, 1971

The package of workplace reforms seems specifically designed to overrule the important place unions have had in the history of developing justice through organising for better, fairer and safer workplace practices in Australia as well as their role in increasing productivity and the realisation of the Common Good. These changes seem to hark back to a previous era; one of division and competition rather than building upon the modern cooperative relationships many employers have developed with unions and workers.

The ‘reforms’, by offering greater flexibility to employers, run the risk of seriously and negatively impacting upon family and community life and becoming a manifesto for even greater social problems in the future. By many accounts the package of reforms does nothing to address already substantial work/family/community imbalances and so we ask what kind of nation is this Government intent on creating and where does kindness and compassion - the option for the poor and vulnerable- fit into that view?

Consequently, if the organisation and structure of economic life be such that the human dignity of workers is compromised, or their sense of responsibility is weakened, or their freedom of action is removed, then we judge such an economic order to be unjust, even though it produces a vast amount of goods, whose distribution conforms to the norms of justice and equity.

Pope John XXIII, Christianity and Social Progress #83, 1961

The development of a permanent underclass of working poor does not uphold the dignity of persons or contribute to the common good.

“Any system in which social relationships are determined entirely by economic factors is contrary to the nature of the human person and his acts.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church #202*)

The economic criteria of the new ‘Fair Pay’ Commission in setting the minimum wage reflect this overly economic view that privileges capital over labour. This is also contrary to Catholic Social Teaching.

