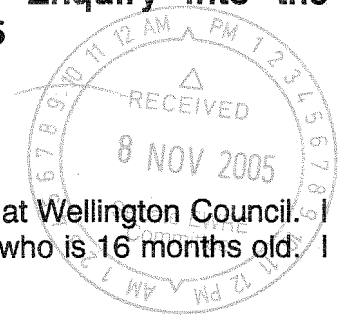


Submission to the Parliament of Australia – Senate Enquiry into the Workplace Relations Amendment (Workchoices) Bill 2005

Submission by Narelle Rich
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My name is Narelle Rich and I am employed as an executive assistant at Wellington Council. I am 34 years of age. My husband, Ross, and I have one child, Oliver, who is 16 months old. I am pregnant and am due in February.

On investigating the WorkChoices proposal I have found that paid maternity leave will not be allowable in awards. The Government has not guaranteed paid maternity leave by law. The Government is only guaranteeing unpaid maternity leave of 12 months, which we already get through State legislation. When Oliver was born I had 6 months off work, of which 9 weeks was paid. Those first couple of months with continuing pay were really important. You need this time to be able to recover from pregnancy and childbirth. Having paid time off work was really important, it's expensive having a baby.

When Oliver was born my husband was in full-time employment with Origin Energy. However Ross has since been made redundant and is now employed in a casual job with a labour hire company. Ross has been lucky enough to get continuing work for the last few weeks, but he hasn't any job security and could be finished up at any time.

Under these circumstances it is all the more important for me to have access to a secure well-paid job and have paid time away from work when the new baby comes.

From what I can tell of the WorkChoices policy paid maternity leave may be preserved in our State Award for a couple more years as a "transitional" condition. So hopefully I will still get access to this entitlement early next year. But after that paid maternity leave will be not allowable in an award. You'll have to bargain for it either in an enterprise agreement or individually, which is a joke. What if the council does not agree? My council can be pretty tough on employment conditions, younger women at my work place may well lose this entitlement altogether. Younger women starting out with a family will have real problems if this basic entitlement is lost. Why would the Federal Government want to take something like that away? They certainly don't tell you that in the ads you see on TV.

I am aware of the Federal Government's proposal to reduce the Award safety net standard for sick and carer's leave. In NSW Local Government our Award currently provides for 15 days accumulative sick and carer's leave. I understand as a result of the Workchoices policy, over a period of time this standard may well be reduced to 10 days personal leave which is the only paid personal leave guaranteed in the Federal legislation.

Given my family responsibilities I do not think that this amount of leave is enough for employees who have young children. Certainly if I were to have any difficulties with the pregnancy I would really need to be in a position to ensure that I can gain access to my current full accrual of leave if it is necessary.

I find the idea that employees will be encouraged to trade off annual leave a terrible idea. Family time is important, you can't be expected to live, eat and breathe at work, you need time away from your work environment to live a real and meaningful life.

The removal of Union rights and conditions is an awful part of the legislation. Under the Federal Government's proposal really basic Union rights such as access to paid trade union training leave and the right for union delegates to participate on local consultative committees will be removed.

Up until we had the baby, I was the consultative committee representative on Wellington Council and have been a Delegate for the United Services Union.

A few years ago, in 2000, we had a really difficult industrial dispute at Wellington about weekend penalty rates. Council advertised some new and vacant positions on a Monday to Sunday open spread of hours removing all right of access to penalty rates. The council thought they had found a loophole in the award. They said they had "assessed the market." Because we had high unemployment rate they knew that people would accept jobs working weekends in parks and gardens and water treatment even though they wouldn't get any penalty rates at all.

There was a big argument about this in the consultative committee and it was only because we had Union representation that we were able to stop the vacant positions being filled and take the dispute to the NSW Industrial Relations Commission. After a hearing at the NSW Industrial Relations Commission Commissioner Patterson made a decision that forced Council back to the bargaining table. I believe that if we did not have local union representation on our consultative committee Council would have just gone ahead and employed these young workers in jobs without any penalty rates at all.

Unfortunately, employers cannot always be trusted to pay a fair and decent rate and if the market enables them to drive down wages and conditions then sometimes this is exactly what they will do.

Sometimes employers will also try to force changes through without consultation. Our State award has strong rights ensuring consultation with the union about workplace change. These provisions have been important in protecting our conditions. I understand that the new workplace laws will remove rights to union consultation and representation in local committees. At places like Wellington I have no doubt that this will disadvantage workers.

The same goes for salary systems. I believe that if skills based salary systems are taken out of our Award Councils will be less willing to conduct annual salary reviews and less willing to provide people with career progression based upon the skills used on the job. I understand that these are threatened in the award as well.

All in all I think that the changes proposed by John Howard and Kevin Andrews are the very worst thing that could happen to Australian workers. I know that over a short period of time workers in local government in NSW will be very much worse off. I urge the Senate to reject these laws.

I would be very happy to attend the Senate Inquiry please make sure that you conduct a proper investigation of these laws. Do not just push them through to satisfy the agenda of the Liberal Party and their mates in big business.



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