

[[Previous](#)] [[ACTU](#)] [[Next](#)]

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Workers want fairness from their employers

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OPINION & ANALYSIS

THE **Australian Council of Trade Unions'** national week of action against the Howard Government's industrial relations changes comes at a critical time for workers and their families in our region.

Under threat from the Howard Government is the right of employees to join and be represented by a union, to bargain collectively for decent wages and conditions, and to have the certainty of an independently determined minimum wage and protection from unfair dismissal.

John Howard and Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews like to talk about their agenda providing increased choice for workers, but employers are already talking about increased control over workers.

At Boeing's Williamstown facility workers have been picketing for a month because management refuses to enter negotiations for a collective agreement.

The majority of maintenance workers have exercised their right to negotiate collectively, but this has been flatly rejected.

It seems that the only choice being offered to the Boeing workers is to sign individual contracts or be terminated.

And while the Government's leaders talk about choice, its back bench is simply talking nonsense.

Member for Paterson Bob Baldwin told the Boeing workers this week to ask the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to arbitrate on their dispute.

But under his Government's Workplace Relations Act, Boeing is the only party to the dispute that at this stage can apply to have the matter arbitrated.

Australian workers should be alarmed that Government backbenchers are

lining up to vote to destroy an industrial relations system they don't even understand.

Labor opposes the Government's unfair changes, and the national week of action has highlighted the depth of feeling in the community as it realises what these changes mean.

In the Hunter, we are already seeing examples of employers flexing their muscles.

Jetstar's investment in its Williamstown maintenance facility appears to have been conditional on a union-free industrial agreement.

More choice: this time between losing union representation or losing a major project for our region.

Choice will only be an illusion for Australian workers and their families as the Government races to the bottom with its industrial relations changes.

In reality, the choice will be between accepting lower pay and conditions, less job security and more fear or having no job at all.

And if workers in the Hunter already feel threatened, the Government has more in store.

It has announced that universities will miss out on funding increases of up to 7.5 percent a year if they do not agree to Government-devised workplace conditions.

Individual contracts will take precedent over collective agreements, current levels of redundancy payouts and maternity leave will be under threat, and limits on the employment of casual staff will be lifted.

What choice does the University of Newcastle have with its current budget difficulties sign up to an ideologically driven workplace agenda or miss out on much-needed funding?

With 450 jobs already to go, and the university in a dire financial state after \$120 million in funding cuts over the nine years of the Howard Government, this is nothing short of blackmail.

Fear, uncertainty and coercion should not be the basis of relations between employers and employees not in our university and not on our shop-floors.

A paper published by 17 respected industrial relations and labour market academics shows that the changes proposed will not increase productivity and will not improve the living standards or job security of workers.

Labor supports a strong Industrial Relations Commission to ensure fair wages and conditions and to settle disputes.

We support the right of employees to bargain collectively for decent wages and conditions, and to join and be represented by a union.

We support the right of workers to reject individual contracts that cut their pay and conditions, and we support the rights of those workers who are unfairly dismissed.

Our civilisation was built on people banding together, collectively protecting

all members.

In the end, it is fairness that working people are asking for in this national week of action.

John Howard's tired old line about being "the best friend Australian workers ever had" has always been laughable.

Now the joke is well and truly over.

Sharon Grierson is the Federal Labor Member for Newcastle.

Caption :NO CHOICE: Boeing workers at Williamtown have picketed over offers of individual contracts.

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[[Previous](#)] [[ACTU](#)] [[Next](#)]

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