



Speech by

Hon. J. FOURAS

MEMBER FOR ASHGROVE

Hansard 27 August 1998

WORKPLACE RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. J. FOURAS (Ashgrove—ALP) (3.01 p.m.): I am pleased to speak in support of the Workplace Relations Amendment Bill because this legislation is concerned with abolishing QWAs and removing the requirement to strip awards back to 20 matters. Apart from one period of sabbatical leave, I have been in this Parliament since 1977. One thing I have realised during that time is what makes a conservative politician. I believe there is only one thing that they stand for and truly believe in with zest and passion, and that is their hatred of unions. The conservatives really are anti-union. That is the main ideological stand of those opposite.

A classic example of that ideology is the former Minister for Industrial Relations, Mr Santo Santoro. I would like to quote what he said about QWAs when they were first introduced. He said it would provide—

"... the flexibility business requires to be efficient and innovative in order to effectively respond to changing customer demands and increased competition."

The key words in that statement are "efficient" and "increased competition". These words concern the downward spiral in wages and conditions. I will have more to say about this matter at a later stage.

I want to contribute to this debate because I believe that QWAs impact on low-paid workers or battlers—the sort of people whom the member for Ipswich West should be representing in this Parliament. He should be worried about those people, not big business. I will come back to the views of the One Nation Party later.

Why do QWAs impact badly on battlers and low-paid workers? The answer is that these are the people who are in an unequal bargaining position. People who can negotiate a good agreement with their bosses are not the people with whom we are concerned in this legislation. QWAs are secretive. QWAs are not allowed to be scrutinised. There is great fear of QWAs being scrutinised by unions because, when they are scrutinised, other workers see the nature of these agreements and that is why the uptake of QWAs is so low. QWAs are concerned with the exploitation of workers and destroying the power of unions.

I want to refer to the deregulation of labour. The myth of an open and fair negotiation process in QWAs needs to be dispelled. It is nothing like that at all; it is simply a question of take it or leave it. That is the norm with QWAs. Those bullyboy tactics only work with people who find themselves in the position where they have to go home and say to their husbands or wives, "I had to sign that QWA because we need the money to pay the rent. I had to cop it in the neck. I had to cop it sweet." The report on QWAs clearly shows that many employers simply provide their employees with a pro forma agreement and demand a signature.

I have no doubt that if we had progressive managers the flexibility and productivity that is required by business can be achieved under the award system. We have had great productivity increases in the past 20 years and they have occurred with 98.8% of workers working under the award system. Collective agreements can give fair outcomes.

I want to return to those remarks I quoted from Mr Santoro. The words "efficient" and "increased competition" stand out. I am really worried about that concept because it really means that Mr Santoro sees QWAs as a method of deregulating the labour market. The member for Noosa said that QWAs

were necessary for business confidence. QWAs are directed towards driving down the price of labour. The golden sixties was an era when we had good economic growth, rising prosperity and people were feeling very relaxed. In terms of social cohesion we had a better society in those days.

Let us remember that when John F. Kennedy was speaking about the prospects of rising prosperity, he said that when the water rises every boat on the water rises with it. He meant that prosperity would apply to everyone. That situation is no longer true in the United States of America. Let us have a look at some statistics from that country. In the past 20 years the gross national product in real terms in America has increased by 35%. One would think that America would be the land of milk and honey. There has been marvellous growth in productivity, but what happened was that productivity was growing at a faster rate than wages. If it was not for global marketing, America would not be able to get away with that situation. Americans would not be able to sell all their products locally. One cannot have productivity rising at a much higher level than wages in a closed economy because one would be producing more goods than one could sell. That makes commonsense. In the past 20 years in the USA there has been a 20% decline in the average wages of the bottom 75% of the workforce. In America the top end of town is getting richer.

The One Nation members tell us that they represent the battlers. They tell us that they want to see that everyone has a fair go. In this process those members are supporting deregulation and, by supporting deregulation, they are against the battlers of Australia. That is what happened in the United States of America. Let us look at the richest State, California, in the richest country in the world, the United States of America. This is what happened as a result of market deregulation. We find that less than 10% of people in California belong to unions. One Nation Party members would have got their way. They hate unions; they are anti-union. They can look at the American experience and see what has happened there. The American experience has led to severe social dislocation. Community harmony has been destroyed.

The jails in California are full. California spends more money on prisons than it does on education. There is more money spent on protecting the rich in California than is spent on protecting the rest of the community. One Nation members are doing the same thing here by supporting labour deregulation. It is frightening to sit in this Chamber and listen to the One Nation members. The member for Ipswich West is one of six One Nation members who won seats from the Labor Party. They should be congratulated. Well done! The member for Ipswich West won his seat, and he won it fair and square—no argument.

What I say to One Nation members is this: in supporting deregulation of the labour market they are acting against the wishes of their constituencies. When they vote this way they have to remember that it will be rammed down their throats at the next election. People in the electorates did not know what they were buying. They did not know that One Nation members would come to this Parliament and support the trans-national corporations.

One Nation members are supporting the people who push the competition policies and who want to destroy unions. One Nation members are supporting those people who want economic growth at any price. One Nation members are supporting people who are pushing the competition policy irrespective of its impact on society. They are supporting the rights of the rich to get richer. They are supporting the rights of workers to be screwed—and well and truly screwed. Come the next election, the people in One Nation electorates will know how their members voted on this Bill. This is a democratic place. Those members have a right to express their votes the way they see it. But in the end they are supporting Mr Santoro's concept. He said that this legislation was all about efficiency and increased competition, but it is all about dropping the price of wages and making the rich richer. Members of the One Nation Party should ask themselves quite clearly: is that what the people of their electorates want? It is not, and I believe that they should reconsider their position.

I am pleased to support this legislation. The member for Noosa was being fanciful when he said that QWAs were necessary for business confidence. That is fine. He is a Liberal. He stands for business. He is there for the blue-rinse set. He is there for the people who live at Ascot. He is there for the people who want to drive around in their LTDs. But One Nation members are supposed to be here for the battlers and the workers, and if they do not support this legislation then we will know that they are not.
