



Speech by

KAREN STRUTHERS

MEMBER FOR ARCHERFIELD

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CALL CENTRES

Ms STRUTHERS (Algeria—ALP) (6.34 p.m.): Last year in this parliament I alerted members to the fact that some call centres in Queensland are at risk of being the sweatshops of this new decade. I am hearing from people in my own area and many others around the state of intolerable working conditions they endure as workers in some of these substandard call centres. Despite the requirement on employers to provide award coverage, the Australian Services Union is frequently acting on award breaches raised by employees. I ask members to think for a minute of what a poorly managed call centre would be like: cramped working space; inadequate breaks; unfair rostering arrangements; a high volume of calls to answer, many of which would be from people suffering phone rage having been on hold for five minutes or more. It is generally low paid casual work.

Julie Bignell and her state and national colleagues in the ASU have done a tremendous job in developing a minimum standards charter to improve working conditions at call centres. It is obvious that this charter is so good that it has some employers and the law firm Freehill on the attack. Freehill has embarked on a nationwide program of seminars that seek to undermine the positive standards promoted in the charter. At the risk of advertising this disgraceful seminar, I point out to honourable members that the Brisbane one is on tomorrow. That seminar is for employers who are low on fairness and decency and who want to get around the call centre minimum standards. I remind members that Freehill has an infamous reputation. It is the firm that represented many anti-union employers, including Patricks, during the waterfront dispute.

The call centre industry is one of the fastest growing in Australia. Up to 160,000 people are employed in 4,000 call centres across Australia. The majority of these employees are women. It is essential that call centres are established with best practice principles and this charter of minimum standards as a foundation. As a member of parliament, I use the Brisbane City Council call centre often and I can recommend it to other members of parliament working locally in Brisbane. It is an impressive service and is very efficient. I know from ASU delegates that this is the model by which others should follow. I encourage our Premier, Peter Beattie, to give his endorsement to the charter, and I encourage employees to give Freehill, through their anti-call centre worker seminars, a miss.
