



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR ALGESTER

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INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AMENDMENT BILL

Ms STRUTHERS (Algeria—ALP) (4.25 p.m.): I rise to support the Industrial Relations Amendment Bill. I commend the minister and his departmental officers for the effort they have put into these amendments and also into the implementation of the new Industrial Relations Act. In a climate of growing redundancies, job losses and corporate failures, the Howard government, as many speakers today have said, is intent on putting the boot into the trade union movement and, in essence, is blaming the trade union movement for our economic woes.

I join the chorus of speakers who have said that the Howard government is intent on looking after its corporate mates—the few, as the member for Stafford has emphasised this afternoon, and not the many. It is looking after the top end of town while failing to protect job security and entitlements for workers. There is no economic sense in this. There is no fairness in this mean-spirited approach to industrial relations.

The new industrial relations legislation in Queensland and this amendment bill do go a long way to striking a balance between the interests of employees and employers. The strong economic growth in Queensland and the low rate of disputation is evidence of a system that is juggling the interests of all parties reasonably well. The way to promote economic growth and jobs is to set up an industrial relations framework that does provide this fairness, this balance between all players within the system. It is a system that acknowledges and values the important role of trade unions in collective bargaining, and it is a system that acknowledges that many small businesses, particularly in this climate, are struggling with the GST—the compliance costs of the GST and BAS statements. Many of them are struggling to stay afloat. Many of them are trying to cut costs. The obvious cost to cut is labour cost. It is a difficult climate to be negotiating in, but I think it is quite unfair—I suppose it is quite typical, though—of the Howard government to put the boot into the trade union movement two weeks after a federal election. In fact, it has been doing it over the past fortnight. It is one of its priorities in its third term.

As the member for Stafford said, the Australian Labor Party is one of the only parties, in and out of government, that works very capably with all industry sectors—employees and unions, the whole lot—to try to get a fair, productive system and strong economic growth. The industrial relations foundation and the state development programs that we have in Queensland are all part of that and testament to that within this state. We have a lot of energy going into export assistance—into assisting companies with new initiatives, research and development at a state level. We have a tax environment that is conducive to business and investment. For employees we have a lot of good things within our industrial relations framework that would not be there if we had a continuation of conservative governments in this state.

Our industrial relations foundation is solid. Now the minister and his departmental officers are, in a sense, able to tackle some of the higher order issues. They are able to look more at these work and family issues. They are able to really focus on some of those issues that I think many workers whose basics are not being met would see as secondary concerns, but in fact they are primary to a good, well-functioning system. I am very pleased that in a short period of time in this role the minister has really tackled some of these issues.

While the industrial relations laws and policy settings are on the right track, it is important that we keep an eye on the reality for many workers. We need to keep investigating workplaces that are doing

the wrong thing. In reality, a lot of workplaces are brazenly overlooking the industrial relations laws. Many workers are living with uncertainty. Many workers in casual employment are not being looked after. They might be brought in for six hours one week, perhaps 20 hours the next, then back to six or eight the next. Those are the sorts of stories I am hearing in my electorate of Algeester.

I have said many times in this House that Algeester can proudly hold the label as the economic hub of south-east Queensland. That is a very positive aspect of my electorate. It is a very productive part of our south-east Queensland corner. It has a mixture of workplaces. It has some very decent and fair employers—I suppose the majority are very decent—but it has a few employers who want to bend the rules and exploit the workers.

The list of complaints I received this week include a community service worker in a non-government agency who was dismissed without notice on grounds that she and her former co-workers allege are totally fabricated. She and her colleagues claim that the story is totally made up by the employer in an attempt to get rid of her. A hospital food service unit worker is seeking answers as to why casuals are sometimes engaged for a mere six to eight hours, yet more casuals continue to be engaged, giving no job security to workers who have been employed for many years. She also asked me why some workers remain as casuals when they have provided many years of continuous service, and she quoted two examples of employees of more than ten years. A workshop employee who had been yelled at and abused for sticking up for his disabled work colleagues is now on extended leave and is uncertain about his work future with the organisation.

We see that all is not well when one looks at the annual report of the Queensland Working Women's Service, which held its AGM at Parliament House yesterday. It is an organisation which provides a lot of support to women in the workplace. It reports 4,210 client contacts over the last 12 months—30 per cent for workplace bullying and harassment, 26 per cent for dismissals and redundancy, 22.9 per cent for employment condition issues, 14 per cent for discrimination and 7.4 per cent for sexual harassment. From the work of agencies like QWWS, we can see that all is not well.

We also know that all is not well when we hear that the national poverty rate has risen to 13 per cent, a rise of 2 per cent since the Howard government came to office. One in eight Australians is struggling to make ends meet, with a family of two adults and two children attempting to survive on as little as \$416 per week. Many families with two children try to struggle through on that amount of money. Where was the federal government's plan to tackle those intolerable levels of poverty during the federal election? Where was the plan to provide a decent minimum standard of living and job security? They did not rate a mention in the federal election campaign of the Howard-Costello government. In fact, we saw our own colleagues—the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the Queensland Council of Unions and the Australian Services Union—my own union—and trade union colleagues mobilising public support to get Ansett workers back in the air, mobilising to get workers the wages and entitlements they desperately need.

There is an ongoing need for active participation by trade unions and independent umpires in our industrial relations system. There is an ongoing need to halt the rate of casualisation. It is encouraging to see the ACTU again calling for casual workers to be made permanent part time after 12 months. This call has been sounded loud and clear by our own QCU and many of our trade union colleagues. There is an ongoing need to push for pay equity. I am encouraged by the work that the Queensland Working Women's Service, many of our trade union colleagues and Commissioner Glenys Fischer undertook in advancing this issue. There is an ongoing need for the industrial basics to be met, as well as those higher order workplace issues that this bill seeks to address.

One issue is making provision for a better balance of work and family. I have visited many workplaces, both in my current role and in a former life, promoting family friendly practices. I remember seeing a cartoon that indicated to me what a long way we have to go. A mother comes home from work, briefcase in hand, and goes to the dining room table. On it, there is a recipe book and a note. The note reads, 'Mum, your dinner is on page 22.' That is not my idea of best practice in family friendly arrangements. We have a lot of work to do. It is great to see the minister giving support to the work and family unit within his department. The government must work actively with private sector employees and public sector agencies to set an example here. We can have greater flexibility—not flexibility that benefits only employers, but flexibility that genuinely supports families and workers with family responsibilities. That flexibility, though, has to be backed by industrial security; it cannot be a loose arrangement that employers can exploit. I am also pleased to see that this bill amends the Industrial Relations Act to enable periods of service with a former employer to be able to be taken as service with a new employer. They must be taken into account in determining the length of service of the employee. These are very practical and fair provisions that I do not think anyone in the House could dispute.

The industrial relations ground and workplaces are forever changing. We need to have continual vigilance on these issues. We need to continue to support the good industrial relations framework that has been established over the past few years. We need to continue to actively involve our trade union colleagues in decision making. I know that a number of them have been a bit disturbed over the past

six to 12 months. Some of them are saying to me that they are seeing our business colleagues around the table with the Premier and other ministers but that they do not see enough of their own colleagues at that table. I do not know whether that is accurate; I am just conveying a perception that has been relayed to me. I certainly encourage the minister to keep in touch and actively involve, as he does, our trade union colleagues in the decision making of the government and make sure that the parties all get a fair hearing in what is, I think, a very good industrial relations framework in Queensland.
