



Speech by

Hon. Margaret Keech

MEMBER FOR ALBERT

Hansard Wednesday, 29 November 2006

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

WorkChoices

Hon. MM KEECH (Albert—ALP) (Minister for Tourism, Fair Trading, Wine Industry Development and Women) (10.06 am): Queensland women have been dealt a devastating blow by the failure of the states' High Court challenge to the Howard government's workplace relations laws. The failed challenge is another setback for women and further exposes them to workplace exploitation.

The changes to the industrial relations system, introduced by the federal government under WorkChoices, are a threat to the rights and privileges Queensland workers have earned through our own industrial system—a system that has worked well here in Queensland, particularly for women. All members should have a great concern about the move towards individual contracts and agreements and the likely widening of the gap between male and female take-home pay.

Australian Bureau of Statistics research shows that women covered by collective agreements have an hourly wage rate that is 11 per cent above women who are on individual agreements. Clearly, it pays to belong to a union. Unions have argued that AWAs fail women, and they are absolutely right. Women on Australian Workplace Agreements—AWAs—earn only 70 per cent of the average earnings of men on AWAs, compared with women covered by awards who earn 84 per cent of men's average earnings. So when it comes to equality in pay, women certainly still have a long way to go. But women know that the Howard government's unfair WorkChoices is not the answer.

Women remain largely concentrated in part-time and casual employment where the workplace laws will have the most detrimental effect. Under these laws, many women stand to lose rights related to their employment conditions as well as losing penalty rates on casual jobs and the right to claim recompense for unfair dismissal. It is a fact: women are worse off under individual agreements. When faced with a take-it-or-leave-it scenario, they might be forced to trade pay for carer's leave or time off during school holidays to the detriment of their families.

One of the hidden costs of the new system, which is only just coming to light, is women's increased susceptibility to bullying. While occupational health and safety laws in the past have attempted to penalise and reduce bullying, the new laws expose women to bullying by giving more power to employers to decide their own workplace structures. In fact, the story I am hearing from women is that there is now less public scrutiny of unethical behaviour in the workplace. We are going to see more women in lower paid and low-status jobs being bullied as a result of their reduced bargaining power.

Women know that now that our legal challenge has failed they are in dire straits. I urge women to join with their work colleagues and the unions tomorrow for the National Day of Union and Community Action—8.30 am at Southport, South Bank, the Gold Coast showgrounds and other regional centres throughout Queensland.

Mr Johnson: Have you invited Merri Rose?

Ms KEECH: The opposition thinks women's rights and women's equality of rights is a laughing matter; the Beattie Labor government does not.