



Speech by

**Karen Struthers**

**MEMBER FOR ALGESTER**

Hansard Tuesday, 22 May 2007

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## **INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

**Ms STRUTHERS** (Algester—ALP) (4.14 pm): I am pleased to support the passage of this very important industrial relations bill. Working people in Australia and Queensland have copped one of the most savage attacks on their employment security and conditions in the history of Australian work relations. This attack has been at the hands of the Howard federal government through the WorkChoices laws. The Beattie Labor government to its credit has taken every possible practical and legal step to counter the Howard-led attack. We have taken many steps to enshrine in state laws and programs support for working people. The Beattie Labor government stands proud in stark contrast to the mean-spirited Howard government.

John Howard has been a pro 'the big end of town' zealot at the expense of working people. In contrast, the Beattie government has a strong record of expanding the rights and working conditions of working people in Queensland. At the same time we have been cognisant of the need to provide a good climate for business in Queensland—an attractive climate with research incentives, export incentives, taxation arrangements that are attractive to business and investment arrangements. We have a balanced approach. This bill deserves the support of all members of this House because it continues with that balance. It continues to support workers who need a fair go while at the same time doing no harm to the operations of businesses throughout Queensland.

This bill deserves the support of all members of this House because it will establish the Queensland Workplace Rights Office and the Queensland Workplace Rights Ombudsman. It deserves the support of all members because it also sets up a low-cost common law jurisdiction for employees on low incomes who cannot afford the cost of litigation in the courts to enforce conditions outside of formal agreements. The industrial relations ombudsman in Queensland will have two main functions—to facilitate and encourage the fair treatment of workers in Queensland and provide advice to the state government on the negative effects of WorkChoices. The Queensland Workplace Rights Office will be a one-stop shop providing advice, and information and it will promote fair industrial relations practices in Queensland. How could members opposite not support these very important safeguards in a climate where the federal government continues to undermine working conditions for working people? They are essential safeguards and mechanisms to help protect working people from those harsh blows.

The Howard government has been ducking and weaving to avoid coming clean to the Australian people about the negative impact of WorkChoices. Its own Office of the Employment Advocate has retreated quick smart from its sampling of more than 250 or so AWAs that it reported on in May 2006. The federal government did not like the results and put an end to that kind of sampling. We are reliant on state based data now to get a clear picture of what is happening in relation to the WorkChoices legislation. According to federal Department of Employment and Workplace Relations figures for 2005 for instance, less than one in 12—that is, eight per cent—of AWAs provided paid maternity leave. Only one in 20—five per cent—provided paid paternity leave. This is one example of where the Howard government's rhetoric does not match its actions at all. It is not helping working families to balance work and family.

In contrast the Beattie Labor government again has a very proud record in promoting security in employment for people in Queensland and also their capacity to balance work and family. I am proud that the Beattie government has taken steps to provide this better balance. For instance, in 2005 when Tom Barton was minister the Industrial Relations Act in Queensland was amended to include a requirement that the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission ensure that awards take into account employees' family responsibilities and, wherever possible, include provisions to allow agreement to be reached on work and family responsibilities.

Way back in 1999 the Beattie government led the country in becoming the first government to provide for unpaid maternity leave for casual employees—for long-term employees with at least two years service. However, the evidence on AWAs suggests that the present system of employer-funded maternity leave will inevitably disappear if AWAs become widespread. It is clear that the Howard coalition government and the Beattie Labor government are miles apart when it comes to the way in which we are keen to support people to balance work and family.

I pay tribute to the Australian Council of Trade Unions and affiliated unions for their ongoing efforts through the 'Your rights at work' campaign. Where would we be without our trade union colleagues, particularly in relation to the current climate where we have such a savage attack on working conditions nationally? I also commend the Kevin Rudd-Julia Gillard Labor federal opposition team for their fight and for their stand to toss out the WorkChoices package.

I say to the members opposite: stand up to your federal counterparts on behalf of working people; support this bill and send a clear message to John Howard that, even if he does not have the capacity to hear what working people are saying, you have and you have the power at the state level to take remedial action. I also suggest that they send a message to John Howard that the best way to increase productivity in this state and country is to drive up skills, not to drive down the wages and conditions of working people. I commend the minister and the staff involved in the development of this bill. I commend the bill to the House.