




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR INALA

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**WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Ms PALASZCZUK** (Inala—ALP) (Leader of the Opposition) (4.07 pm): I rise today to speak on the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I rise today to oppose, in the strongest possible terms, this bill introduced by a government as the latest effort in its blatant, ruthless and cold-hearted attack on Queensland workers and their rights. I would like to thank the hundreds of workers who came to Parliament House during their lunch break to protest against this bill. There were many workers there. There were even some workers who in the past had been injured.

Mr Bleijie: Lawyers.

Ms PALASZCZUK: There were also some lawyers there as well. I hear the Attorney-General commenting—not from his seat where he is supposed to be if he wants to comment, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Watts): Order! Leader of the Opposition, you have the call. I will deal with the interjection if he does it again, but he is not in the chamber at the moment.

Ms PALASZCZUK: He was interjecting from other than in his seat.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: I understand that. You have the call.

Ms PALASZCZUK: I would like to pay tribute to the union representatives who attended today and spoke. Ron Monaghan from the QCU was one. We had the AWU, the AMWU, the ASU, the CFMEU, the BLF and a range of lawyers standing up for workers' rights in this state—workers' rights that each and every one of the LNP members want to dismantle. That is what the LNP members want to do.

A government member: Was Williamson out there? The HSU?

Ms PALASZCZUK: Yes, absolutely. There was a broad range of workers there who are concerned about what this LNP government wants to do with their rights—workers' rights that have actually taken a generation or more to develop into the best workers compensation scheme in Australia. But this government, not content to sit back, always wants to keep attacking the workers in this state. We sent a very loud and clear message to people who attended that rally today. We said very clearly—

Government members interjected.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Mr Deputy Speaker?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Watts): Order! You have the call.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Mr Deputy Speaker, there has been a series of interjections and I am not taking the interjections.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: If I think it becomes disorderly I will tell them. You have the call.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. What this government is doing with its Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill is trampling on a proud tradition. It is trashing the hard-fought and hard-earned rights of every ordinary Queenslander who goes to work each day deserving to be safe and expecting and deserving to be protected when their safety is compromised.

This government seeks to ignore history. This government will take a knife to history. And that is a history characterised by proud Labor men and women, by wise and dignified men and women who fought for workers and fought for ordinary Queenslanders, who fought to install a system of workers compensation which affords us all confidence and dignity in our workplaces as well as the confidence that we will be protected should things in the workplaces go wrong—a system which gives all workers peace of mind, a system which does the right thing, a system that affords all Queenslanders the most basic human decency.

I say again that the system of workplace protection that we enjoy and can be proud of today is based on a century-old platform that was devised and crafted and implemented by proud and wise and dignified Labor Queenslanders—people who were far prouder and far wiser than those opposite, people who had the courage to stand up for workers and their families.

Mr Cripps: If you don't mind patting yourself on the back.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Member for Hinchinbrook, people who had the courage to stand up for workers and their families, unlike those opposite who demonstrate only their innate weakness in seeking to dismantle it.

The bill we are presented with today is further proof that this government views workers and their jobs as commodities that can be cut from balance sheets at the drop of a hat. They never see people—people with families, people with children to support, people who contribute to their local communities and to our state as a whole and its future.

Government members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! Members.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It proves that the LNP will stop at nothing to attack workers and their hard won wages and conditions. Anyone looking for proof that this LNP government is at war with ordinary hardworking Queenslanders need not only look at this disgraceful bill. They need to look at this government's short but brutal track record in trashing workers' rights. They need only ask any of the more than 14,000 workers this government has so far thrown on to the scrap heap and ask any of the thousands of others who remain fearful for their jobs and, critically, their rights in the workplace.

In just 18 months the Premier and the Attorney-General, and each of the ministers who sit around the cabinet table and each of the LNP members who are sitting in this place today, have carved a path of destruction through Queensland workplaces. They have humiliated workers. They have pounced on their self-respect and they have attacked their dignity. They have attacked the workers' dignity in this state.

Government members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order! You have the call.

Ms PALASZCZUK: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. They have attacked the very dignity of collecting a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. They have ruthlessly launched an attack on the independent umpire, the QIRC. They have determinedly frustrated the efforts of unions to stand up for their members. With the stroke of a pen they have destroyed the employment security for government workers in this state—and now this.

I know that there are some members opposite who take workers compensation seriously and actually agree with our position. Then there are other members—who I am sure are many in number—who blindly follow the decisions of the Premier and his Attorney-General with little regard for history and with no regard for what is right. They are the ones who are too cowardly to speak up even though they surely realise that what they are doing is simply and utterly wrong. For their benefit today I offer them a lesson—a lesson in the evolution of workers compensation in this state, a lesson in how critical, how vital, this system is to every workplace throughout Queensland.

When they blindly vote on this bill, falling in behind the Premier and the Attorney-General, perhaps then they might hang their heads in shame when they realise precisely what it is they are

crushing—when they realise what they are doing to workers in Cairns, in Ingham, in Cooktown, in Emerald, in Ipswich West, in Roma, in Townsville, in Mackay, in Miles, in Dalby, in Toowoomba, in Normanton, in Mount Isa and in all places in between.

Government members interjected.

Ms PALASZCZUK: They can interject as much as they want but the LNP members sitting in this House know that they have cut over 14,000 jobs throughout this state and that is having an impact in each and every member's electorate.

Mr Cripps: The unemployment rate is going down across Queensland—more people employed.

Ms PALASZCZUK: You have thrown out your unemployment target, haven't you, Minister? Since 1886 Queensland has had in place some form of workers compensation scheme. The Employers' Liability Act 1886 rightfully required employers to take out insurance to pay workers and look after their wellbeing when they had sustained injuries in the workplace. It not only protected workers but also protected employers.

The TJ Ryan government's election in 1915 was based on a platform that included a strong commitment to reform workers compensation. It led to an extensive, no-fault system which covered a majority of workers. This was groundbreaking legislation. This was important legislation. It was legislation that ensured no worker would be penalised for suffering an injury at work. It was legislation that ensured employers were accountable. It was legislation that formed the foundation for the scheme workers and employers remain guided by to this day—almost 100 years later. It was precedent-making legislation. It was Labor legislation. It set out that insurance became mandatory for employers and extended coverage from manual workers to practically all workers in the state. It set out that workers were also protected on their trips to and from work by including journey claims.

In the years following, a number of important amendments were made to our laws, and once again for the benefit of many members who do not understand the history and have not bothered to learn it I will point a few out. In 1930 Queensland saw the introduction of mandatory medical reports for compensation claims. In 1944 the term 'accident' was repealed and the definition of 'injury' inserted. This allowed compensation to be paid to a worker who, while not being involved in an actual accident, had suffered some injury from their job. 1972 saw the full introduction of full award wages for injured workers for the first 26 weeks of their recovery.

Over the past 23 years Queensland workers have been covered by the Workers' Compensation Act 1990. Although the name of the act has changed over the decades, its philosophy, its structure and its intent have remained consistent—to provide protection for workers while at the same time giving fairness and equity for employers paying premiums.

What the LNP government is doing is once again stripping away workers' rights. What is perhaps one of the most appalling aspects of this determined effort to penalise workers is that the committee charged with reviewing our system of workers compensation did not recommend that it be attacked. The Premier and the Attorney-General have completely ignored that. Just as they threw more than 14,000 workers on the scrap heap, they now want to go the extra mile and ensure that nobody can access what is rightfully and what is fundamentally theirs should they be injured in their workplace.

They intend to make the system so weak in its definitions that it will, in turn, offer workers weaker protection. This is just the beginning. More is to come and none of it is good. Among the fresh pain to come, this government has plans for massive outsourcing across core government services including health. They intend to do this and that intention will lead to further job losses.

We in Labor believe in the dignity of work for every Queenslanders. We believe in fair and decent conditions for Queenslanders at work and fair workers compensation for people injured at work. Unlike the LNP, we believe in job security for all Queenslanders. We believe in the power of the independent umpire. We will fight for the rights of workers, and we will continue to fight against the government's constant attacks on workers. Every LNP member in this place should today not only feel a deep sense of shame but also search their souls because what they are voting on when they support this bill is an attack on not only every worker in this state but also future generations of workers—their children and their grandchildren. It is a vote against the best advice of their own LNP members, and it is an attack that history will record as the latest in a shocking pattern of attacks against ordinary, decent Queenslanders.

This bill offers a stark lesson in history: a lesson in contrasts. The big reforms to give basic support and protection to workers were delivered by Labor legislation. Today we see that support and protection stripped away by LNP laws. This is the same choice voters will have at the next election: between a party that cares and listens, and one that does not.

I today repeat the commitment we have already made: when Labor returns to office we will scrap the changes being made here today. We will return the scheme to where it was before this greedy, uncaring, callous and cold-hearted LNP government and its equally callous and uncaring Attorney-General got their hands on it. In short, once again it will be Labor that delivers a workable and just workers compensation scheme to Queenslanders.