




Speech By  
**Curtis Pitt**

**MEMBER FOR MULGRAVE**

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Record of Proceedings, 15 October 2013

**MOTION: WORKERS' RIGHTS**

 **Mr PITT** (Mulgrave—ALP) (5.35 pm): I move—

That this House recognises the fundamental rights of workers, including a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, job security and safe working conditions, and condemns the LNP government for its sustained attack on Queensland workers that has resulted in a massive erosion of rights and conditions during the past 18 months.

Since March 2012 Queenslanders have seen a concerted and ongoing attack on their rights from this extreme, ideologically driven LNP government. As we have seen the Attorney-General introduce the latest of these attacks today, this is a good time to remember and reflect on what actions have already been taken.

Last year we saw the LNP attack the independent umpire—and we know that when the LNP go after workers their first step is to knee-cap the independent umpire. They also introduced the requirement for the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission to consider the 'fiscal position' of the government in any deliberations. That testimony was not open to cross-examination or able to be tested. The ridiculous nature of this so-called 'evidence' saw the Under Treasurer literally reading out passages from the Costello interim report. We all know how independent the Costello report was! Apparently the information that should form the basis of workplace negotiations is contained in the report done by Peter Costello.

Not content to leave attacks on workers to the chambers of the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, the LNP also destroyed the very core of public sector job security with the stroke of a pen. The LNP ideological approach was to hang an axe over the heads of all public sector workers. Apart from it being unfair and a lousy management approach, it also contributed to people tightening their belts and closing their wallets and led to slowing economic growth in this state.

At times it seemed the ideological approach of the LNP was to make changes out of spite. They changed the century-old traditional date of the Labour Day public holiday, just because it had the word 'labour' in it; they made it easier for the Attorney-General to unilaterally intervene in disputes; and they stripped protection from outworkers, the most vulnerable workers in our community—all while giving themselves a huge pay rise.

We know that there are more attacks to come. The LNP have announced that they have a planned program for outsourcing. Under the Orwellian description of 'contestability', we know what it means for workers: a drive to the bottom for wages, safety and services. While the LNP see numbers on a page, we see men and women who deliver for our community. Those opposite must understand: they are the pathologists who test the blood of your mother in hospital, the wardie who assists your husband, the cleaners who keep patients' rooms infection-free and the cooks who keep people healthy. But the LNP government do not see a hardworking paramedic who cares for a cancer patient struggling to make it to hospital; they see only business opportunities for their mates.

Of course, the worst was still to come. The LNP seemed surprised that workers would actually resist their horrific sackings and the stripping of core rights. So when the public campaign got too tough for the Premier and his glass jaw, the LNP introduced draconian legislation to try to silence workers and their representatives in public debate. The LNP introduced laws aimed to: silence the voice of workers by imposing impossible administrative burdens on organisations to exercise their free speech; force burdensome requirements on unions and officials, including disclosure requirements far beyond that of even company directors; impose 'transparency' requirements for unions but not for employer associations; make it harder for workers to join their relevant union; and make it harder for union representatives to enter a work site to protect the rights of members.

Every time we hear from the Attorney-General about 'harmonisation' of legislation, we know that it is all about hiding ideological agendas. What the LNP did last year with the Industrial Relations (Fair Work Act Harmonisation) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill was cherry-pick the most difficult areas, add their own in and pretend it was harmonisation. The devil is always in the detail with the Newman government. They are absolutely politically motivated and absolutely out to destroy unions, which have a very strong history of defending workers' rights here in Queensland. The silencing of unions by prohibiting them from spending their own funds on matters of public importance and issues at the core of their members' interests is, in short, the most extreme measure in the modern democratic world.

As we discussed in the debate on the industrial relations legislation, the LNP introduced a new and perverse version of red tape. Barely a day goes by in this chamber that LNP backbenchers do not roll up and say their prayers to the deity of small government and rail against the dreaded red tape. So blinkered are they when it comes to 'red tape' that they cannot tell the difference between red tape and best practice regulation—cutting protection for vulnerable outworkers, stripping communities of a voice in planning decisions, removing protections for vulnerable and significant environments, all under the flag of reducing red tape. In those circumstances the red tape was a side-effect of the policy goal: protecting the rights of low paid workers, having well-thought-out planning that involves community input and protecting vulnerable and significant environmental areas. But with the LNP hatchet job on free speech, red tape was not a side-effect; it was the very purpose of the legislation.

Imposing such an administrative, logistical and costly burden, just to spend their own money, effectively ties their hands behind their back. Teachers cannot campaign about teacher-student ratios. An issue that is at the heart of their industrial and professional lives is prevented from being aired in the public realm. If the Police Union want more police on the beat or the UFU want better conditions for their firefighters, they are prevented from spending their own money to raise these very public issues in the public arena—all because the Premier and his lapdog the Attorney-General cannot handle alternative views about matters of public policy importance. And then of course we see the LNP attack on our workers compensation scheme. I was proud to work hard with fellow MPs as part of the Finance and Administration Committee that conducted the inquiry into Queensland's workers compensation scheme.

**Mr ELMES:** I rise to a point of order. The member for Mulgrave is talking about workers compensation and there is a bill before the House.

**Madam SPEAKER:** Thank you, Minister. I ask the member to address the motion and not anticipate debate on another issue.

**Mr PITT:** Madam Speaker, I will not. I will go into details of that process in a moment, but firstly it is a sad indictment of the approach of the Premier and the Attorney-General that when the committee delivered a unanimous report they treated it with such disdain. One of the specific recommendations of that report delivered by an LNP dominated committee regarded the definition of 'worker'. This was dealt with in previous legislation. The Finance and Administration Committee and then the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee clearly recommended that the definition of 'worker' be strengthened. What did the Attorney-General do? He changed the definition to weaken protection for workers, excluding thousands of workers from protection. The inquiry was the most comprehensive committee inquiry in this parliament. Submissions were received from employers, unions, employer organisations, representatives from WorkCover and many legal representatives who have worked in the field of workers compensation for decades. Let me borrow the words of the member for Coomera, the then chair of the committee, where he outlined in his foreword to the committee report that the inquiry—

... received 246 submissions, held public forums in Mackay and Cairns, held 14 public hearings in Brisbane, including five in-camera hearings, and held three public departmental briefings.

But in a slap in the face to his own LNP colleagues, committee staff and those who provided submissions and testimonies, the Attorney-General simply threw the unanimous report aside. He forced through changes to the definition of 'worker'—literally redefining thousands of workers as not being employees, stripping them of protection. What strikes me is how flippant the Attorney-General is when it comes to stripping men and women of their working rights. The protection that injured workers deserve is currently in place because we believe in the basic principle that people who go to work and get injured by a negligent employer should receive care and support. A construction worker who gets injured on a site should be treated as an employee and be protected—not thrown to the scrap heap to fend for themselves—with proper return-to-work support and the prospect of an ongoing income.

This government has form. It has form when it comes to attacking decent working people. It has shown a commitment to continually remove fairness and decency from the public sector and let its ideological obsessions cloud what the community has come to expect. We on this side of the House are proud to stand for a strong and independent Queensland Industrial Relations Commission; security of employment to Queensland workers; the right to join a union and organise fellow workers to pursue common interests; and the freedom to raise issues of importance in the public arena to promote the interests of workers and the policy outcomes that they stand for. It is somewhat shocking that in 2013 I have to stand in this chamber to spell those basic differences out. At one point I was worried that we were all converging into the middle and that people may not be able to see the differences between the political parties. Isn't it amazing what we are seeing now? You could not find a more stark difference between the two sides of politics than that in this parliament. I have to say that this government is going the right way to repeating the efforts of the Borbidge-Sheldon government, which was an absolute horror—an absolute horror—in the mid-nineties. Those opposite are borrowing a range of things from the Joh era and borrowing things from the Borbidge era. It is doing the tory play book when it comes to commissions of audit and everything else that you can find. It is absolutely shocking how quickly the government is digging itself into a hole.

It is grossly shocking that, to many people on the LNP government backbench, those basic and widely accepted values that I just talked about are unacceptable. We will continue to stand up against the LNP's attack on decent Queenslanders and we will fight the coming changes and bring the community with us. That lot over there can be arrogant in this chamber with a huge majority, but if they are not careful they can overstep the mark and the voting public will let them know. I sense that many members from the LNP party room will be approaching the Attorney-General shortly to prove me right about some other things that we are not allowed to talk about in this debate.