




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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**COMMUNITY SERVICES INDUSTRY (PORTABLE LONG SERVICE LEAVE)
BILL**

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (12.22 pm): I rise to make a contribution on the Community Services Industry (Portable Long Service Leave) Bill 2019. I rise in strong support of portable long service leave. This reform is important for all sectors and is something that the Greens have been advocating for years. The community sector in particular needs this reform. Against this backdrop, it is unbelievably cynical for the government to have adopted their shameful pay freeze into this bill. It is morally, industrially and economically indefensible. This pay freeze is a shameful betrayal from Labor, straight out of the LNP's playbook. Despite my firm support for portable long service leave and the Greens' strong track record on this issue, I cannot support this bill including the proposed amendments. The Greens firmly support portable long service leave, not just in the community sector but across all industries. Our workforce is increasingly casualised and mobile, and as workers move from one employment to another more quickly than we ever have before, we need this change.

This does not mean long service leave should be lost to the past as an entitlement. Since 2014, Greens MPs have worked in state and federal houses of parliament to enact portable long service leave for all workers. More than any other, we have to enact portable long service leave in the community sector as a priority. There are some key features of the sector that make this the case.

The Services Union laid out in their excellent submission the widely documented features of this sector: that it is low-paid, largely female and sustained by short-term funding arrangements. This results in short-term tenure for employees, often with multiple employers, but, paradoxically, really long-term service within the sector. Support for our communities depends on the experience, the commitment and the care of these workers, and community workers often find themselves in high-stress environments exposed to crisis and trauma.

More than any other sector, funding for these roles in the community sector is dependent on government support and philanthropic contributions. Government support is often uncertain, subject to political moods, and has a history of being conditional on community organisations holding back on criticism of the government. Government funding also means that wages tend to be no more than the award wage. The nature of state and federal government funding means that roles are tied to short-term contracts which must be retendered on expiry. The introduction of the NDIS is expected to compound this. Fundraising, too, is inherently uncertain and depends on general economic conditions, which are particularly bleak at the moment, and the cycle of the issues that are of most concern to donors at a point in time.

During my time in the community sector, I learned about this instability the hard way. I worked in the community legal sector for five years before being elected to this place. Within weeks of accepting my job as an environmental lawyer, state funding was abolished by the Newman LNP government and my role became inherently uncertain, along with those of a host of other community organisations, like Sisters Inside and Tenants Queensland, then known as the Queensland Tenants Union.

The inquiry into this bill heard submissions from many individuals who told personal stories about how portable long service leave would make their working lives more fair, and said that the best way to protect the entitlements of community workers is to enact portable long service leave in the way this bill proposes. I would like nothing more than to be able to stand here and simply support this bill and the well-deserved entitlement for the community sector, but if I support this bill I will be breaking my promise to stick up for the hundreds of thousands of workers betrayed by the short-sighted morally and economically indefensible wage freeze that the government has snuck into the bill. I cannot fathom how a Labor government can pull off such a deeply cynical manoeuvre as this—giving to the community sector with one hand and taking away from the entire Public Service with the other.

What kind of mind-bending illogic allows the Premier to stand in front of the media and tell us she is honouring her commitment to freeze public sector wages? What about the legally binding commitment to Queensland teachers that she has just ripped up? Let's be clear: the Premier is blithely dishonouring her commitment to hundreds of thousands of Queensland public servants.

This Labor government, by backing out of hard-won pay agreements for public servants, puts at risk any remaining faith workers might have in our enterprise bargaining processes. Why should workers and unions be expected to engage in good-faith negotiations when this is the possible outcome? It is a broken promise and a betrayal of some of the most crucial and hard-working people in this state, and this from the party that claims to look after workers and respect their rights. It is a deep betrayal and I am sure it is one that will not be forgotten.

This kind of extraordinary legislation, which goes to great lengths to tear up an agreement, is not unprecedented, but we have not seen it since the Newman government legislated to override conditions around permanent employment and workload protection. What great company the government keeps, taking cues again from Campbell Newman himself and the *Courier-Mail* and making policy by press conference. We know tough times are ahead and someone has to pay for Queensland's economic recovery, but with these amendments the government is saying that that should be everyday frontline workers—not them, not us and not their big corporate donors.

This government froze mining royalties in the same year the resources sector exported \$68 billion worth of resources. We could raise billions of dollars each and every year from the resources sector by simply raising royalties to a fair amount, but instead they get a freeze that protects their profits. The Greens' Fair Share Plan would raise \$55 billion in four years and that is even if thermal coal production halves by 2025, on track to be phased out by 2030. If the government imposed just a 0.5 per cent levy on the big banks in Queensland, we could raise \$4.7 billion over four years, but they will not touch big business profits. Instead, they are cutting workers' wages.

There is no justification for this pay freeze. It is morally indefensible, as I have said, it undermines the entire system of enterprise bargaining and it is terrible economics. The freeze affects some of the lowest paid public servants in the state. These are people who are more likely to spend money when they have it, including at local businesses that desperately need it. It is a pretty straightforward proposition that you do not cut spending during a recession. We need stimulus to support our economic recovery, not austerity, and this freeze will cost jobs and be a further drag on our state's economy.

I have had countless emails over the last few weeks sharing stories of disappointment and fear about this pay freeze. A pay deferral does not mean these workers get the same money a bit later on, and that is especially the case for those who are on defined benefit superannuation. Their superannuation benefits could be affected if the wage increase is not in place before 1 July. Teachers who planned to retire this year have told me they do not know what they are going to do now that the government is reneging on their EB.

Overwhelmingly these frontline workers tell me they are still grateful to have a job, of course, in such uncertain times, but many of them are also trying to house, feed and clothe family members and loved ones who have lost their jobs. One example came from a school guidance officer in my electorate who spoke about how her colleagues went above and beyond during the COVID-19 lockdown, giving up holidays and working round the clock to deliver online learning and even driving to families' homes in their own cars to get learning packs to kids. Another teacher told me—

My husband has lost half of his work hours and stands to lose his job altogether in June. With three children to raise, this leaves us in a precarious position financially. Teachers have partners and families. We have mortgages. We have bills to pay. This decision assumes that none of that matters; that teachers don't matter.

Another said—

This government is thanking us sincerely with one hand and slapping us in the face with another. I really felt for once teachers were finally being valued. It certainly does not feel that way now.

Yet another heartbreaking message read—

The government relied on the teachers like me and my colleagues to turn up to work every day during the crisis so that essential workers could get to work during the crisis. We were essential. We were crucial. We were frontline. We were vital to keeping the economy and necessary services running. Having served our purpose, now the government appears to have forgotten how vital we are and appear to be using the crisis as an excuse to penny pinch and add to our struggles. We appear expendable once again.

If I support this bill I would be breaking my promise to stick up for those affected by the wage freeze. It is a travesty that under a Labor government hundreds of thousands of workers will be worse off. It is genuinely staggering that Labor has moved so far to the right that it has now been outflanked on the left by these bleeding hearts of the LNP.

For that reason, despite my strong and longstanding support for portable long service leave for the community sector, I cannot support the bill if it is amended as it is proposed to be today. I want to thank the Services Union, my union, for all the work they have put in to get these amendments up, but I am genuinely sorry that I am likely to be in a position where I cannot support this hard-earned reform.

This is a topsy-turvy place today. The LNP is going to introduce amendments proposed by the Greens to freeze MPs' pay rather than the pay of the Public Service. The member for Moggill has said it is only the LNP that will stand up for workers in Queensland. I accept that he was not here during the Newman years so perhaps he has a blind spot to that. Labor will be voting against workers where the LNP sees fit to support them.

I cannot believe the Labor Party is carrying on with more of this tough-on-crime rhetoric to the point where we are committing more kids to be locked up. They are legislating and mandating the precise circumstances that led to the children in watch houses scandal. We know that this disproportionately affects Indigenous kids and is absolutely reprehensible in light of the recent outcry about Indigenous incarceration and deaths in custody. It is shocking. I cannot support this bill in its format.