

Talking Point: Workers being left behind in good times

Tasmanian workers know the rules that once made our workplaces fair are broken. That's why hundreds of workers from across Tasmania converged on Hobart on the 29th of April, many travelling from the North and North West, to join together and demand a better deal for working people.

The Tasmanian union movement believes that every worker deserves a job they can count on. Having a job you can count on means knowing you'll have work that is secure. It means knowing that you can pay your bills this month, next month, and every other month after that.

And for too many Tasmanians, this is becoming harder and harder.

Forty percent of Australians are now in insecure work. It proliferates workplaces in Tasmania in the public and private sector. Take the University of Tasmania. They're one of the state's largest employers, employing around 7,500 people, however; over 70% of employees are in insecure work.

As the Secretary of Unions Tasmania, I speak to people who do all types of work. Every time I hear a worker tell me they've been casual for years, I think to myself 'that's got to be a record'. Until I meet someone else. Like the security guard who has worked for the same employer for 11 years, full time hours, all year round... but he's still casual. Or the academic who has worked in the same job for 20 years and never had anything other than a fixed term contract. That's two decades of insecure work.

These aren't casual jobs. These workers aren't 'Christmas casuals' employed to cover a holiday peak. Casualisation, fixed term contracts, labour hire and sham contracting are the myriad of legal ways employers ensure workers don't have security of employment from one day or month to the next. It's time we gave worker's rights to secure jobs.

While working people struggle in their search for job security, wage growth is at near record lows in Tasmania, as it is across the country. At a time of soaring company profits, why isn't the wealth being shared with workers?

Of course, workers know why. It's been years since they've believed the lie that trickle-down economics delivers benefits to them.

Clearly one of the contributing factors to Tasmania's low wage growth is the Liberals blind adherence to a 2% wages cap for the State Service. With recent ABS data revealing that healthcare has increased by 4.2%, housing by 3.3%, transport by 2.9% and education by 2.6%, their pay packets are going backwards.

But it's not only the pay packets back of nearly 28,000 Tasmanians that are being held back. A wage cap serves the dual purpose of sending a signal to the private sector that there is a limit on pay increases and 2% is it.

Many Tasmanian unions have attended a bargaining negotiation with an employer in the private sector who have cited the Government's 2% wages policy as a reason for not offering anything more despite their profits or the productivity of their workforce.

Tasmania desperately needs a pay rise, but our Government is content to tell business not to give workers a decent one.

And we're kidding ourselves if we think we can keep talking about how we cope with rising living costs if we don't concurrently talk about the negative effect our lower average wages and sluggish wage growth has on working families' ability to put food on the table and pay their bills.

We must also stop the wage and superannuation theft suffered by Tasmanian workers. In recent months, we have seen some horrendous examples of exploitation of vulnerable workers.

A Hobart restaurant had to pay back their lone employee over \$19,000 after it was found they were forced to work for as little as \$10.36 an hour. The relevant award minimum was \$24.45. There's multi-tasking and then there's forcing someone to be a manager, chef, waiter and book keeper only to pay them less than half the minimum wage.

In February this year, it was revealed contract cleaners in Tasmania's major supermarkets were being paid as little as \$7 per hour for training and \$14 an hour for work. If you talk to United Voice, the union representing cleaners, they'll tell you this is wide spread in a range of sectors.

These weren't accidents or genuine mistakes. This was business practice built on exploitation.

This really goes to the heart of why the union movement is fighting to change the rules. The pendulum has swung too far in favour of big business. They have too much power and its workers who are paying the price.

With inequality at a 70 year high and job security and fair pay rises out of reach for too many, Tasmanian workers have made their views clear – they're going to change the rules.

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