

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Australia: New Report to World Trade Organisation Puts Australia at the Bottom of the OECD on Workers' Rights, with Women Workers Hardest Hit

Brussels, 5 March 2007 (ITUC OnLine): With the World Trade Organisation General Council assessing Australia's trade policies this week in Geneva, a new ITUC report (http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ITUC_submission_to_WTO_2007_final.pdf) highlights the negative impacts on the country's workforce of the Government's industrial relations laws, which impose heavy restrictions on internationally-recognised labour standards.

The report strongly criticises the Australian Government's industrial relations laws ("WorkChoices" Act), which makes Australia the only developed country where employers can refuse to negotiate with a union even when employees are union members and want their union to represent them. The report documents the severe legal limits that are imposed on the basic rights of Australian workers to organise in trade unions and the strict restrictions the laws place on the items that can be included in collective bargaining, in violation of International Labour Organisation standards which Australia has ratified. The report also cites recent evidence in Australia of women's incomes falling behind the cost of living since the introduction of the new laws and an increasing gap between the wages of male and female workers in Australia.

"The Australian government is wrong to claim that imposing these restrictions on fundamental rights is needed to compete in the global economy. In fact, other industrialised countries are focusing on investing in skills and productive capacity as well as improving national infrastructure rather than attempting to compete with low-wage, industrialising nations", said ITUC General Secretary Guy Ryder.

"This report shows that Australia's pledges to the World Trade Organisation that it will uphold international labour standards are not being fulfilled", he added.

The ITUC report catalogues a number of examples of workers losing out under the new Australian laws through being pushed onto individual employment contracts, a centrepiece of the laws. The case of Western Australian construction workers who are facing legal action launched by the Federal Government, and who risk substantial fines for taking industrial action in support of a sacked colleague, is also raised.

Research cited in the report shows that real wages for women in the private sector actually fell by some 2% between March and August, while the reduction for men was around 1.2%, partly due to the higher concentration of women in lower-paid service and clerical jobs. The lack of sufficient Federal legislative protection for young workers is criticised, and the report also notes concern that up to 1,000 persons each year are victims of people trafficking into Australia, especially

in the sex industry.

"This report shows just how far Australia is falling behind decent global standards in the workplace, and we know from experience that when countries go down this road, inequality and exploitation can only increase", said Ryder.

Founded on November 1 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

<http://www.ituc-csi.org>

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