

LABOUR RELATIONS REFORM BILL, NON-UNION COLLECTIVE AGREEMENTS

749. Mrs EDWARDES to the Minister for Consumer and Employment Protection:

I refer the minister to the Premier's statement on ABC radio on 6 March 2002 on the industrial relations reforms that the whole point of the Government's system is to provide choice for companies and choice for employees and, therefore, the Government has no problem with a company, in this case Rio Tinto, offering its workers the choice of a non-union collective agreement. Does the minister agree with the Premier; and, if so, why is there no provision in the Labour Relations Reform Bill offering the choice of a non-union collective agreement?

Mr KOBELKE replied:

I sincerely thank the member for the question, which enables me to clarify some matters and make sure that the facts are on the record. When the last Government introduced major changes in industrial relations, it talked continually about choice but it denied that choice to employees. It granted a greater level of choice to employers, and some good came of that, but it denied choice to employees. The Government is ensuring that both employers and employees have the maximum possible range of choice. The reason the state legislation does not provide for a non-union enterprise bargaining agreement is not that the Government is opposed to it; but that it is already available under the federal system. People can use that system if they so wish. Similarly, many unions asked us to provide for protected industrial action, so that they could strike and be protected. That provision is not in the legislation. I told the unions that the provision is in the federal legislation if they wished to use it.

We are providing choice, but we need to be absolutely clear that the argument being driven by the Opposition and some spokespersons in the community - that is, somehow workplace agreements delivered - is a furphy. They did not deliver productivity, higher wages or job growth; they did exactly the opposite. A report was published today by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training, a well-respected national body, which has worked for a range of organisations, including the federal Employment Advocate, major companies, industrial organisations and unions. ACIRRT conducted a survey of 200 workplace agreements, which covered more than 3 000 workers. It covered areas of security, retail shopping, contract cleaning, restaurants and cafes, which the last Government's studies indicated were areas of exploitation. The ACIRRT report indicates that 56 per cent of employees in those employment areas were receiving below the hourly award rate of pay that they would otherwise have received, and a further 31 per cent were receiving \$1 or less above the hourly rate. Given that many employees have traded off leave loading, penalty rates and part of their holidays, they are worse off. The summary of the report states that individual workplace agreements also lacked any provisions that would achieve productivity improvements. It also stated that, on balance, the outcomes are more detrimental to, than positive for, most employees.

ACIRRT is a well-known national body that has conducted this sort of research in a range of areas. Its research on workplace agreements in this State has produced a damning report that indicates that workplace agreements have not created job growth or productivity, but have driven down the working conditions of many thousands of ordinary men and women in this State. The Opposition stands condemned for the misleading statements it is making. Changes in legislation before this House will advantage employees and employers and make sure this State has a decent employment system.