

AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACE AGREEMENTS

464. Mr A.P. O'GORMAN to the Minister for Employment Protection:

Can the minister comment on media reports today on the number of Australian workplace agreements that have failed the federal government's so-called WorkChoices fairness test?

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS replied:

I thank the member for Joondalup for his question and for his support of working families in this state. I am very concerned about the figures that were released yesterday by the Howard government's Workplace Authority. Since 7 May this year, 123 100 AWAs have been lodged under the Howard-Hockey fairness test, yet only 12 749 of those AWAs have been assessed by the Workplace Authority. That is a backlog of more than 110 000 AWAs. If the Workplace Authority keeps going at this rate, it will take about 10 months to clear the backlog. However, about 30 000 AWAs are lodged each month. Assuming that the authority does not get to those either, there will be about 300 000 AWAs awaiting assessment in 10 months' time. The media has reported that one in seven AWAs have failed the so-called fairness test of John Howard and Joe Hockey, with fundamental conditions of employment having been ripped out of employment contracts. Statistics demonstrate that employers have continued to rip out the working conditions of working families and the most vulnerable workers, including those in low-paid industries such as retail and hospitality. For example, there was reference in *The Australian* today to a female food and beverage worker who is employed in a hotel under an AWA who has had penalty rates and shift loading removed from her conditions of employment. That worker has suffered a cut to her take-home pay of \$156 per week. There was also an example of a female shop assistant who had lost \$42 per week. That is a lot of money for generally low-paid individuals. The Howard-Hockey WorkChoices rip-off really is a shame, particularly in the hospitality and retail industries. The most vulnerable workers are those who are the lowest paid and youth.

Joe Hockey said on the ABC yesterday that this was a success story. I have to ask: what would failure look like if this is a success? It is really difficult to get honest answers from the Workplace Authority. The federal minister is selective in his interpretation of the statistics that are released. The statistics that he uses are highly misleading, particularly for the retail and hospitality sectors, which have a very high turnover of employees. The total number of AWAs quoted by Joe Hockey is nowhere close to the truth, because people change jobs relatively quickly in those industries. This issue is of particular concern in Western Australia, because in the year to 31 March 2007, 208 564 AWAs were registered in Western Australia out of a total of more than 752 000 AWAs registered nationally. In Western Australia, the Howard-Hockey statistics for the three-year period to 31 March 2007 showed that 69 per cent of employees in the hospitality sector were employed on AWAs, which is the highest proportion of AWA usage in any industry in any state or territory. This is of major concern. Joe Hockey's tendency to manipulate the statistics of the Workplace Authority and to then publish them is an issue that I have raised with him. In fact, I wrote to him on 8 August this year. What a surprise: I have received no response to my letter!

Several members interjected.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Order!

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: I challenged those figures because they do not even vaguely resemble the facts. Members opposite can laugh, but this is a really important and significant issue for many Western Australian families who are vulnerable to AWAs. I have sighted some AWAs that are in force in Western Australia. They rip out from under people some basic and fundamental working conditions. Joe Hockey's and John Howard's Workplace Authority has admitted that one in seven AWAs does not even pass their fairness test. The federal government's own Workplace Authority has highlighted instances in which low-paid workers have lost out.

Mr A.J. Carpenter: How do you think Joe Hockey performed on *The 7.30 Report* the other night?

Mrs M.H. ROBERTS: How do I think he performs generally? He should probably have stuck with the morning show with the all-singing, all-dancing Kerri-Anne Kennerley.