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INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS REFORMS DISGRACEFUL AND EXCESSIVE

Uniting Church leaders today condemned the Government's proposed industrial relations reforms and the limited safeguards announced yesterday which do little to protect the rights and conditions of Australia's most vulnerable workers.

Uniting Church President, Reverend Dr. Dean Drayton, said the Government's 'WorkChoices' reform package is more about choice for business than protecting the country's workers.

"We are not comforted by the very minor safeguards which have been included. The Government is so focussed on the economy as an end in itself that it has lost sight of the real purpose of economic systems. The economy is a tool which should serve the needs of people.

"Workers are not commodities in the service of greater profits – they are people trying to make a decent life for themselves and their families. 'WorkChoices' claims it will make our labour market and our economy more competitive - but where does it legislate for cooperation, collaboration and community?"

Rev. Drayton said the Prime Minister has made an art form out of the use of the word 'choice'. "The 'WorkChoices' package wrongly assumes all employees can negotiate a fair deal for themselves and that employers will not take advantage of the most vulnerable in the pursuit of profit," he said.

UnitingJustice Australia National Director, Rev. Elenie Poulos said the Church was very concerned about the plight of low-paid workers on AWAs, especially casual employees and younger workers.

"These are people who cannot risk saying no to an employer's request for a change in wages and conditions.

"The membership of the Fair Pay Commission is skewed in favour of economists and big business. The Government must act to ensure that workers earn enough to provide for themselves and for their families and we've seen nothing in the package that shows the Fair Pay Commission will do this.

"On top of this, the changes to unfair dismissal laws mean that many workers will be unable to challenge their termination, even if it is grossly unfair. The removal of unfair dismissal laws is a disgraceful and excessive over-reaction to a system that may have needed some reform."

Rev. Drayton said that the Uniting Church will continue to advocate for the well-being of those most in need and for a society that has justice and community at its heart.

"Christian teaching has, from its beginning, acknowledged the pursuit of wealth as the priority in life as a fool's errand. Happiness requires a great deal more than wealth and will not be created by a continued focus on a free and unfettered market," Rev. Drayton said.

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