

## The Impact of WorkChoices on the Community

Speech to the Health Services Union Conference  
Rev. Dr. Ann Wansbrough  
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Thank you for this opportunity to be with you today.

There are several reasons that the Uniting Church is concerned about the recent amendments to the Workplace Relations Act under the Orwellian title “WorkChoices”, which of course means “giving employers choices as to how to reduce the rights, wages and conditions of workers”. These concerns are

- The erosion of workers rights
- The interaction of these amendments with the so-called “welfare to work” legislation passed in the same month.
- The inevitable poverty that will result
- The general trend of which these two pieces of legislation are a part, namely legislation to reduce human rights – civil, political, economic, social and cultural
- The increasing focus on economic goals, to the detriment of social goals, and on the individual, to the exclusion of the collective
- The increasing dichotomy between welfare for the rich and hard work for the poor.
- All this inevitably leads to the fragmentation of society, a loss of social cohesion and increasing crime, violence and punitiveness.
- In summary, the loss of a decent life for many Australians.

“WorkChoices” erodes **human rights and social values**. For the churches, it is contrary to our understanding of what God wants for the world. The effects will undermine community and family life and damage the future of Australia. WorkChoices means that this nation will pass on a distorted set of values and distorted society to our children and grandchildren.

WorkChoices **vandalises 100 years of achievement** by the union movement. It is based on a dangerously false mythology that everyone has equal power in the workplace.

The problem is that **for some people** with high level marketable skills, WorkChoices mythology is sometimes true. The government then uses that as an excuse to undermine the system of collective bargaining and protections. It is a form of “blaming the victim” – the assumption is that if you are low paid, it is your own fault. This is a dangerous attitude, which reduces understanding of poverty and the sense of compassion and solidarity which is needed to respond to the problem of poverty. It is also, of course, an attitude highly unfair to most workers.

**The poverty created by WorkChoices** will cause increasing damage as more and more workers lose their penalty rates and allowances, and are forced to work whatever time and days their employer wishes without any special compensation. There will be an enormous gap between the working poor, and the rest of the workforce. It is the extent of the inequity in income distribution that creates serious problems both for individual families and for communities. It is hard to be poor in a society that is generally affluent.

The problem starts in **early childhood**. Professional child care is more than warehousing of children – it provides significant early childhood education that creates the foundations for educational achievement at school and life opportunities when school is finished. Early childhood teachers and workers are among the most poorly paid of all knowledge workers, but childcare is nevertheless extremely expensive and beyond the reach of most low income families.

UnitingCare **Burnside**, which works with children and young people at risk, and with their families, last year launched a campaign against child poverty. One of the key platforms is a call for government to fund at least a year of early childhood education for every child, so that access does not depend on one's parent's income. In a WorkChoices era, such a program becomes absolutely essential. I hope that the unions will join this call for positive early intervention to give all children a decent start in life.

In UnitingCare we know that there are already many families who **cannot afford basic elements of a decent life**, like proper school equipment and excursions, housing, medicine, dental care or adequate clothing, heating and cooling, or transport. More families will face these problems as minimum wages remain low in the name of "fair pay".

The government who brought us WorkChoices is the same government who has slashed funding for **public housing**, so that poor families have to take whatever housing they can get in the private rental market. Public housing in NSW is now so tightly targeted that it is practically impossible for a family without multiple disadvantage to get housed. So a campaign to restore public housing funding would be a good idea.

There are likely to be **increasing calls on local community services**, as more and more people find themselves unable to manage impossible budgets, and get behind with rent, mortgage and personal loan repayments. Crises such as illness, or a broken down car or washing machine, will be devastating. There will need to be increased funding of community services if they are to meet the need for emergency financial help and counselling. The loan sharks will do very well.

But the problem is much deeper and broader than this. The **wellbeing of society** depends less on people's absolute income, and more on people's sense that life is fair, that they have some control over life, and that they can work with other people to improve the situation of their community. People need to experience their human rights and human dignity, and they need hope.

When people find themselves in unequal negotiations with an employer, or on the resultant low wages and inadequate conditions, **they experience a lack of control over life and a lack of personal worth and human dignity**. This creates stress and is a health hazard. It also undermines both the capacity and the willingness to live as a member of the community and cooperate with other people. Yet the need for people to support one another will be greater than ever. **Community capacity building** will be an essential part of union and church activity in the brave new world of WorkChoices.

Under WorkChoices, **social cohesion is seriously at risk**. The gap between low and high paid workers will increase. The problem will be worst for workers with no special marketable skills, but there will also be problems for skilled workers in health, early childhood education, education generally, and community services. For example, some

churches have a commitment to pay decent wages, but this is limited by government funding, which in future is likely to assume the lowest wages possible.

Last year when the Moderator of the Uniting Church in NSW wrote to all federal MPs, drawing attention to this problem, **Wilson Tuckey** replied that we would as a church be perfectly at liberty to pay our workers what we thought was just, but we could not expect taxpayers to subsidise our morality. We replied that we thought the real problem was that he seemed to expect health, education and community service **workers to subsidise the community** by accepting wages far below the value of their work. We will go on advocating for better funding in these areas.

In the WorkChoices era, people on low pay will find it hard to maintain their sense of community. Poverty leads to alienation. Even if people manage to keep a sense of community, **poverty limits community participation. Participation requires discretionary income.** Clubs have membership fees. Sport requires uniforms, equipment and entrance fees. Political parties charge membership fees and expect contributions. Travel to meetings and events costs money. Churches are open to everyone, but people can feel embarrassed if they cannot contribute to the offering or pay for various activities. People who live in poverty find themselves sidelined from activity that the rest of us take for granted. Marginalisation contributes to alienation.

WorkChoices will thus **exacerbate trends already evident in society**, trends towards alienation, increased aggression, civil unrest, social fragmentation and violence. In the last two years, we have already seen three riots in Sydney. I have no time for rioters, I have to say. But when poverty is the root cause the solution is not tough law and order talk or throwing people in prison – the proper solution is to remove the injustices that lead people to feel alienated, unvalued, and aggressive – i.e. to eliminate poverty.

**Underlying all this is the betrayal of human dignity and human rights.** WorkChoices is part of a whole suite of legislation in November 2005 that significantly eroded our rights – an agenda that has been in evidence for some years, but was less obvious when the government lacked control of the Senate. The Public Interest Advocacy Centre has produced a human rights kit, and the Uniting Church funded them to produce training resources which they provide in train the trainer workshops. **I encourage all unionists to undertake**

Churches will go on advocating on these issues. I encourage you to document the negative effects of WorkChoices and make stories available to the churches through their social justice agencies and their communications units.

We are entering a difficult era. But if we hold onto basic human values like cooperation, sharing, support for people struggling to survive or victimised by bad bosses, non-violent resistance, collective action and voluntary work in the community sector so that together we meet those needs that people cannot afford to pay for, we can make sure that this nation is worth living in even when WorkChoices is in operation.

I pray God's blessing on all of you present today, on all your work colleagues, and your union, and on all Australian workers as you seek justice and a decent life. May Jesus Christ walk with you and the Holy Spirit give you hope and endurance. Amen.