

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights

#### ● Article 1

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

#### ● Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

#### ● Article 24

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

### Work Justice

Rev. Dr Ann Wansbrough

*In the just reward of labour  
God's will is done  
In the help we give our neighbour  
God's will is done*

*Frederick Green Together in Song 168 v 2*

The Australian Government proposes to make substantial changes to labour law later this year. This info-action sheet outlines the changes and suggests how they can be evaluated by Christians.

### Government Proposals

- In 2005, the Australian Government is proposing to make a number of changes to "workplace relations" law. These would :
- Change the way minimum wages are set, to make them lower and less fair
- Encourage individual contracts, undercutting existing rights and conditions
- Remove many conditions from awards, reducing their value
- Exempt "independent contractors" from labour standards
- Allow too many jobs to be called "casual"
- Make it harder for unions to provide workers with information and assistance
- Abolish unfair dismissal laws and redundancy pay entitlements most workers
- Reduce the powers of the Industrial Relations Commission
- Over-ride the state IR systems, including their legislation that protects outworkers
- Reduce fairness

### Who will be affected?

- Half of all employees currently earn less than \$650 per week (\$33,700 pa) – this is about 4.1 million workers.
- Almost 2 million people earn less than \$400 per week. 1.3 million of these are paid less than \$300 per week.
- There are now more than 2.2 million casual workers, an increase of 22% since 1996.
- The number of casual full time jobs has been increasing. By August 2003 the number was 785,000. Half the full time jobs created in the period August 1996-2003 were casual jobs. More than half of "casuals" stay in their jobs more than one year. Casual workers are more likely to be paid the lowest rates possible for the work that they do.
- Women will be badly affected by the proposals. One third of women workers are casuals and have no entitlement to paid annual leave, family leave or unpaid maternity leave.
- Outworkers are likely to lose the protection of special legislation that several governments have recently agreed to enact.

## Human Rights

Internationally recognised human rights instruments are based on human dignity.

The United Nations *Declaration and Covenants* and the Conventions of the *International Labour Organisation* (ILO) set minimum standards for work so that it does not harm human dignity.

They are supported by most Christian Churches.

The point of these human rights is to ensure that people who have paid employment do not become “hungry and despairing” but rather receive a living wage from their work.

### Actions :

- Collect information on how the proposed changes will affect workers in your area - and their families
- Arrange a public meeting to alert other people to the changes and their effects
- Lobby your local member of Parliament, opposing the changes
- Participate in union actions to oppose these changes
- Act ecumenically and with community organisations where possible.
- If you are an employer, oppose changes that make it harder to be an ethical employer

## Expressing our Faith

Work, whether paid or voluntary, has intrinsic value because it is a way of contributing to human society and working as co-creators with God.

Following the example of the prophets, Christians oppose public policy that creates poverty or exploits people. In Australia, paid employment is an essential way for most people to earn the income they need in order to live. *People are excluded from participation in economy and society* when wages are too low to provide a *decent* life for themselves and their families.

God did not create human beings to serve commercial interests, rather commerce exists to serve human beings. Its benefits should be shared, not provided only to an elite.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16) is about much more than wages; it is about the Kingdom of God and the grace of God for all people, whenever they come to faith. But the story is relevant to the issue of wages as it relies on the image of the responsible employer to make its point about God. The wage for a day labourer, one denarius, was the minimum that a family needed in order to live. The employer pays everyone this wage, even though he could have paid some much less.

As the Australian Industrial Relations Commission has long recognised, in a civilised society, a minimum wage must at least allow for a worker to support a family “in frugal comfort”. It is essential that such a wage be provided for unskilled workers who have no power to negotiate a higher wage. No worker should be paid less than is necessary for subsistence.

## Uniting Church Response

The NSW Synod of the Uniting Church has expressed its commitment to labour standards in a *number of ways*. The clearest statement is the *Church as Employer* principles. We believe that in our own work we should pay fair wages, provide good working conditions and cooperate with unions. We oppose attempts by other employers and the government to erode the wages and working conditions of low paid workers.

Awards provide a level playing field for small businesses. The less they cover, the harder it is to be an ethical employer in the face of unethical competitors.

UnitingCare NSW.ACT therefore supports the following criteria for evaluating the government proposals. In our view, many of the Government’s proposals fail these criteria.

- An independent arbiter (the Industrial Relations Commission) to set minimum wages in accordance with the concept of a living wage
- The use of a system of awards in setting wages and conditions
- An independent arbiter to resolve workplace disputes
- Secure work – permanent rather than casual
- Protection of the right of workers to bargain collectively and to join and be represented by unions
- The right of all employees to challenge unfair dismissal and to receive redundancy pay and their entitlements whether they work for small or large business
- A secure, safe and healthy workplace where people do not experience discrimination, harassment and bullying.
- Equal pay for work of equal value
- Conditions of employment that allow a balance between work and family life
- Protection for workers so they cannot be forced to become independent contractors, eg outworkers in the garment industry should be deemed to be employees.
- Fulfilment of Australia’s obligations under International Labour Organisation standards

Further details and additional resources are available at

<http://unitingcarenewact.org.au> and

<http://nat.uca.org/unitingjustice/>

Also look for further Fact Sheets on this issue that may be sent later in the year and placed on websites