



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

APPROPRIATION BILL (NO. 1) 2005-2006

Consideration in Detail

SPEECH

Thursday, 16 June 2005

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

Source House
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Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney) (12.24 pm)—I wonder whether the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations will tell us a little bit about a strike that is taking place in his own department today in Sydney. Apparently DEWR staff are holding a one-hour lunchtime strike in Sydney about the stalled enterprise bargaining negotiations. It seems that the department wants to make employment for new workers from 4 April conditional on their accepting an AWA. There is also, of course, the added issue of pay: the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations is offering 3.9 per cent per annum against a union demand of five per cent.

You would think that the department of workplace relations would set themselves up as a model employer and seek to have good relationships with their staff as an example of the cooperative industrial relations system that we have always wanted in Australia. It certainly existed under Labor. Instead of a cooperative system that values productivity and healthy workplaces, the management at the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations are using every trick in the book to avoid coming to a settlement with their own staff. They have delayed direct negotiations with the union. I suppose that is no surprise coming from a government that are so ideologically obsessed with unions that they are trying to ban student unions that provide sporting facilities. The management also seem to have been knowingly suggesting or pursuing unacceptable positions—positions they know will never be accepted by the staff—thus dragging out the industrial disputation at DEWR.

As I said earlier, management are seeking to put all new Department of Employment and Workplace Relations employees on AWAs, individual contracts. In the past DEWR staff have had a choice. If they have wanted to go onto individual contracts, they have been able to do so. Again we see the ideological obsession of the minister spilling over into the management of the department. The vast majority of public servants are able to have a choice about whether they sign an individual contract or continue to pursue collective bargaining. Obviously the department should be looking to itself as a model employer, an employer that has cooperative relationships with its staff and that offers individual agreements, if that is the wish of the government, but the notion that a gun should be held to the head of new employees—if they do not sign on, they are not going to get a job—seems absolutely contrary to everything we have stood for in this country in our previously cooperative industrial relations system.

Management at DEWR are also threatening to take away employees' access to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. They are reducing redundancy entitlements, they are cutting back the current broad based performance pay system to replace it with mega bonuses for a select few in the management hierarchy and they are removing people's rights to choose a collective agreement rather than an AWA. If the minister presides over a department where this sort of thing is happening, pity help other workers in Australia who have even less bargaining power than people who are experts in industrial relations and presumably are able to negotiate, with the help of their union, on their own behalf.