



Media Release

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Changes are needed to make Work Choices fairer – Catholic employment body

The Catholic Church's employment relations body has today called for further changes to be made to the Work Choices legislation in order to promote fairness in Australian workplaces and achieve a proper balance between the rights of employers and the rights of workers.

The Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCER) has called for the changes in its new book, *Workplace Relations: A Catholic Perspective*, an examination of Catholic social teaching on work and workers' rights and on related economic and social issues.

The book also examines concerns expressed by the Catholic Bishops in November 2005 when the Work Choices legislation was before the Parliament, in which they questioned whether Work Choices would promote truly co-operative employment relations and ensure the protection of the poor and vulnerable.

In particular, the Bishops raised concerns with the Government's legislation regarding the minimum wage, minimum conditions and bargaining, unfair dismissals and the role of unions.

ACCER Chairman, Mr Brian Lawrence, said ACCER had considered each of the four areas identified by the Bishops and tested the relevant parts of the legislation against Catholic social teaching.

He said ACCER found that Work Choices does not provide proper balance between the rights of employers and the rights of workers and changes are needed to address this.

"ACCER has also called for changes in relation to the setting of minimum wages in order to protect the financial position of families and to make fairness the primary obligation of the wage-setting authority," he said. "The wage-setting function should be returned to the Australian Industrial Relations Council and all members of the Australian Fair Pay Commission should be appointed to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission."

There should be a return to a fair safety net of minimum terms and conditions to underpin both collective and individual employment agreements; a return to the 1996 no-disadvantage test; and the termination of existing agreements that do not comply with that standard.

"ACCER rejects the recently introduced fairness test as insufficient," Mr Lawrence said.

Mr Lawrence said ACCER does not oppose statutory individual agreements, providing they meet the no-disadvantage test and do not prejudice or frustrate the rights of workers to pursue collective employment agreements.

ACCER's examination found that Work Choices can frustrate the ability of workers to act collectively and can frustrate unions in the representation of their members' interests, thereby making the right to union membership devoid of any meaning and effect in the workplace.

It called for a return to the previous unfair dismissal scheme, introduced in 1996, on the basis that unfair dismissal rights should not be dependent on the size of the employer's undertaking.

For more information contact Brian Lawrence on 0402 103 184. A PDF version of the book can be accessed at www.acer.asn.au.