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Two years on and the Liberal Party still doesn't get workers' rights: unions

Two years after the *Fair Work Act* swept away WorkChoices, Tony Abbott has confirmed he has succumbed to Liberal Party extremists to plan a renewed attack on rights at work.

ACTU Secretary Jeff Lawrence said Mr Abbott had bowed to pressure from his party and employer groups who want a return to hardline industrial relations policy, confirming he was planning a "strong and effective" new strategy.

"The Liberal Party is so addicted to WorkChoices that as soon as Tony Abbott climbs ahead in the polls, it begins planning to bring back its anti-worker industrial relations system," Mr Lawrence said.

"The Liberal Party remains deluded about workplace rights, with Mr Reith this week describing WorkChoices as 'one of the great successes of the Howard Government', forgetting how Australians resolutely voted against it and his party at the last two elections.

"Mr Reith's call for a return to a WorkChoices-style policy was quickly answered by Mr Abbott's announcement he was planning to change the workplaces relations system that has only just restored the rights of workers taken away by WorkChoices.

The ACTU is today releasing a report that totally debunks the views of the Liberal Party and big business that Australia's workplace relations system is not working well and destroys any argument for any return to WorkChoices. The ACTU's analysis of two years under the Fair Work Act confirms the system that replaced WorkChoices has been good for Australia's economy, has led to less industrial disputes and more people than ever before are covered by collective bargaining.

"The reality is the Fair Work Act has restored protection for all workers from unfair dismissal, the rights to collective bargaining, better access and representation from unions in the workplace, a proper safety net, and the abolition of Australian Workplace Agreements," Mr Lawrence said. "In contrast, WorkChoices placed millions of workers in vulnerable employment, undermined protections, and led to real cuts to the value of minimum wages."

The ACTU's report is a stocktake of the past two years, showing overall success in the restoration of workers' rights. However, it also highlights areas where improvements must be made to further strengthen workers' rights at work, especially for casuals and other non-permanent workers. Unions believe there should be one law for all workers not matter what industry they work in, and the discriminatory laws for the building and construction industry should be abolished.

"Our analysis reiterates that during the Global Financial Crisis, Australia led the way in showing that a strong economy does not have to come at the cost of fair workplace relations," Mr Lawrence said. This means that fair and secure conditions for all workers is crucial if we are going to drive productivity and participation, and build the skilled workforce our growing economy needs."

But Mr Lawrence said we should be under no illusions that these gains were always at risk. "Unions are determined to defend the *Fair Work Act* from these attacks, but to also build on the advances of the Act, so it delivers in practice for all working Australians," he said.

The report, *The Fair Work Act: two years on* is available at www.actu.org.au

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