'FOCUS ON WOMEN'

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INFORMATION PAPER

The Impact of the *Work Choices* Industrial Relations Reforms on Women

This summary gives a concise overview of the potential impact on women of the changes to federal industrial relations law under the *Work Place Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005*.

Key points

- Changes to how the minimum wage is set, and the likelihood that adjustments may not be as frequent or as reasonable as current arrangements, will have a disproportionate effect on women. Women are more likely to be concentrated in jobs affected by minimum wage regulation, in terms of industry and nature of employment (casual, part-time), than men.
- The move towards individual contracts and agreements is likely to widen the gap between male and female take-home pay. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) research shows that women covered by collective agreements have an hourly wage rate that is 11% above women on individual agreements. Women on Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) earn only 70% of the average earnings of men on AWAs, compared with women covered by awards who earn 84% of men's average earnings.
- The Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard offers a lower benchmark for wages and conditions than is currently available under the award system. Australia-wide, women make up 60% of employees in highly award-regulated industries such as tourism and community services. The new federal laws are therefore expected to have a disproportionately negative impact on women's employment rights (such as paid maternity leave and work and family entitlements).
- Of all women employed in Queensland in 2004, 46.2% worked in part-time or casual employment. Small townships have the highest proportion of part-time employed women (54.3%) compared with 51.9% in rural areas and 46.5% in major urban centres. There is concern that vulnerable workers will be most at risk of being required to enter into collective agreements or AWAs that reduce their entitlements, either to obtain a new job or to keep their old one.
- The issues of award-setting, bargaining for individual agreements and loss of entitlements are likely to disproportionately affect women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Indigenous women. These groups of women may be even more likely to be in casual, low paying positions with low bargaining power, and difficulties with language and literacy skills will make effective bargaining less likely.
- The new workplace relations laws may also have a large impact on young people, particularly in rural areas where they are already at a disadvantage in terms of access to education, training, apprenticeship or employment opportunities.

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Introduction

The changes to the federal *Workplace Relations Act 1996* contained in the *Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005* (referred to as *Work Choices*) represent a major shift in the industrial relations landscape. Work Choices details plans for a unified national industrial relations system that will override State industrial relations laws for corporations. Most of the provisions are expected to commence in early March 2006. This will result in significantly fewer people being covered by the state systems.

The Queensland industrial relations system covers around 70% of the Queensland workforce at present and provides a strong and relevant award system, a choice of agreements to suit different employment situations, and provides minimum conditions, such as leave entitlements and unfair dismissal provisions for all employees. It is a key factor underpinning this state's strong economic performance. The existing system gives Queensland employers the flexibility to make agreements that suit their business needs while ensuring that workers are protected. Coverage by Queensland's industrial relations system will be reduced to around 40% of workers under the *Work Choices* changes.

Work Choices will remove independent setting of minimum wages, remove the right for many employees to claim recompense for unfair dismissal and remove the no disadvantage test used in agreement-making. Given that Australia-wide, women make up the majority of employees in award regulated industries such as tourism and hospitality, retail trade, and health and community services, these changes are expected to have a disproportionately negative impact on women, affecting advances in pay equity and employment rights (such as paid maternity leave, superannuation, penalty rates for casual employment, and work and family entitlements).

This Information Paper addresses the impact on women across four key themes:

- Section One: Pay Equity
- Section Two: Work and Family Balance
- Section Three: Casual Employment
- Section Four: Young Regional Queenslanders, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Women and Indigenous Women

Section One: The impact of Work Choices legislation on pay equity

Wage Setting

Work Choices makes changes to the way minimum wages are set. While minimum award rates were previously set by the independent Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC), this function will now be undertaken by the federal government-appointed Australian Fair Pay Commission (AFPC).

Under *Work Choices*, the AFPC will set and adjust:

- the standard Federal Minimum Wage
- special Federal Minimum Wages for junior employees, employees with disabilities and employees under training arrangements
- basic periodic rates of pay and basic piece rates of pay
- classification levels
- casual loadings.

According to *Work Choices* the main objective in wage-setting is to promote economic prosperity and job creation, whereas the historical Australian wage-fixing principle was based upon the idea of a fair community standard. There is a widely held concern that the introduction of the AFPC will lead to lower wage increases than those granted by the AIRC. Since 1996 the Australian Government has supported only minimal adjustments to the minimum wage. It has been estimated that had the AIRC accepted previous Australian Government's submissions, the minimum wage would be $50 less than it is at present. Under the new federal system, the minimum wage is anticipated to decrease relative to average wages. The first decision of the AFPC is not expected until late 2006.

Any decline in real terms in the minimum wage will have a disproportionate effect on women, because women are much more likely to be low paid. Casual workers often work at the lowest rates of pay and a significant number of casual workers are women.[1] Women are also more likely to be concentrated in jobs affected by minimum wage regulation, in terms of industry and nature of employment (casual, part-time), than men.

Proposals to change how the minimum wage is set, and the likelihood that adjustments may not be as frequent or as reasonable as current arrangements, may make the relative costs of child care even more problematic, especially as the federal government has not set a limit on child care costs.

Loss of access to state tribunals dealing with pay equity

Under *Work Choices*, large numbers of employees, most of them women, will be moved out of the state industrial relations system into the federal system without any choice in the matter. Loss of access to state tribunals and state-based pay equity principles will deny many women the opportunity to redress pay inequity and will lead to the further devaluation of women's work. Current state-based industrial tribunals across Australia have recently held pay equity enquiries that have lead to increased award rates of pay in female-dominated jobs and industries, where it was shown that women's work has been undervalued. For example, a recent decision by the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission provided wage increases for dental assistants.

Individual contracts

The biggest threat to pay equity comes from the move towards individual contracts and agreements, which is likely to widen the gap between male and female take-home pay. There is evidence that women are worse off than men under individual agreements. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) research shows that women covered by collective agreements have an hourly wage rate that is

11% above women on individual agreements. Women on Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) earn only 70% of the average earnings of men on AWAs, compared with women covered by awards who earn 84% of men's average earnings.

There is concern that under the new system AWAs will not be reached through genuine bargaining with employees, but will be written by the employer for the employee to either accept or lose their job. In this process, workers who lack the experience or ability to bargain are in danger of losing a range of conditions.

There are many studies which show that different capacities to negotiate between most men and most women mean that women lose out when required to bargain as individuals for their terms and conditions. Reduced bargaining power of specific groups of women (e.g. primary carers, single mothers, older women) may threaten wage levels and employment security and create the potential for increased casualisation of jobs and increased unpredictability of working hours. In addition, in individual negotiations the objectives of reducing the pay gap and improving the balance between work and family responsibilities might be placed in conflict, and women might be forced to trade pay for carer's leave to look after children or older relatives, for time-off during school holidays, or for parental leave.

Furthermore, under *Work Choices*, there are no longer any exemptions to the provision for non-disclosure of an AWA to a third party, even with authorisation from a party to the AWA. This will decrease transparency of agreements for the purposes of ensuring equal pay for work of equal value. *Work Choices* does allow for an employer or employee to appoint a person as his or her bargaining agent in relation to the making, variation or termination of an AWA. However, while this could be beneficial for an employee, it is doubtful whether the most disadvantaged and low paid workers, predominantly women, would be able to afford to pay for representation, or would be as aware of their rights in order to take steps towards finding and approaching such an agent.

Section Two: The impact of Work Choices on work and family balance

Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard

Under the current industrial relations system, individual agreements (Australian Workplace Agreements – AWAs) and collective agreements are subject to a no-disadvantage test to ensure that workers entering into agreements are not disadvantaged compared with award conditions. Under the new system there will continue to be collective agreements and individual agreements, however the no-disadvantage test will be replaced by the Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard (the Standard) specifying five minimum conditions for employees:

- maximum ordinary working hours of 38 hours a week averaged over the applicable averaging period, plus reasonable additional hours
- annual leave of four weeks per year, plus an additional week's leave for shift workers
- parental leave of 52 weeks unpaid leave
- personal leave of 10 days per year, of which all can be used for carer's leave, plus two additional days for unpaid carer's leave and two days compassionate leave.

The Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard (the Standard) will provide minimal entitlements to wages for employees who are employed in award-free and agreement-free industries. The minimum entitlements are to be based on the minimum award classification. However, the 'basic rate of pay' element does not guarantee any additional allowance or loading for hours worked on a public holiday. Any such allowance or loading may be determined by the applicable award or workplace agreement (with the result that any pre-existing loadings can be eroded). *Work Choices* does allow employees the right to refuse a request to work on a public holiday if he/she has reasonable grounds for doing so.

Agreements made under the *Work Choices* legislation are lodged with the Office of Employment Advocate and must provide entitlements that are equal to or more favourable than the Standard. Federal award and agreement provisions more favourable than the Standard will continue to apply. If they are less favourable (e.g. awards with only eight days sick leave), the Standard will apply.

An erosion of current standards

It is anticipated that under the new system there will be a reduction in wages and conditions for workers because the Standard itself offers a lower benchmark for wages and conditions than is currently available under the award system.

Current conditions will only be guaranteed during the transitional period. Once a transitional agreement has expired, minimum conditions under state awards and agreements will no longer apply and wages, conditions and benefits will require negotiation of a new agreement between the employer and employee. All work, whether currently covered by an award or not, can then be offered under an agreement that only offers the minimal entitlements of the Standard. This will clearly impact on workers' ability to balance their work and family responsibilities.

The current award system covers 20 'allowable matters' which are prescribed in the minimum award conditions. *Work Choices* reduces this number to 16 by removing jury service, notice of termination, long service leave and superannuation. The federal government has argued that these matters are already covered by state or federal legislation. The real impact of the removal remains to be seen. However, given that women have significantly lower superannuation balances than men, any erosion of their superannuation rights will be detrimental.

Agreements will be able to remove or modify seven protected award entitlements, namely public holiday pay, rest breaks, overtime/shift loadings, annual leave loading, incentive bonus and payments, allowances, and penalty rates, without any compensating benefits. Employees are only entitled to these conditions to the extent that they have not been modified by or removed from the agreement with their employer. Employers will also have the right to dismiss staff due to 'operational requirements' and then to

offer them their job back under an agreement that only offers the minimum Standard.

For example, the Standard guarantees 52 weeks of unpaid parental leave to all workers. While federal award and agreement provisions that are more favourable than the Standard will continue to apply if an agreement reaches its nominal expiry date and has not been renegotiated, the employee will revert to the minimum conditions under the Standard and the seven protected award conditions. This means that many women are at risk of losing paid maternity leave provisions in existing awards and agreements.

The federal government has not legislated the more favourable provisions arbitrated in the AIRC Family Provisions Test Case, including the right to request up to a further 52 weeks parental leave, 8 weeks simultaneous parental leave, returning to work part-time, and consultation with the employee about major changes at the workplace while on parental leave. The exclusion of these provisions from the Standard has removed a window of opportunity for the federal government to improve the retention of mothers in the workplace and to protect them against discrimination.

A report prepared by Dr Barbara Pocock for the Victorian Government on the impact of *Work Choices* on working families concludes that AWAs on the whole are not family friendly. Between 1995 and 2000, only 12% of registered AWAs included any work and family provisions, 25% included family or carers leave and only 8% had paid maternity leave. Some 58% of workers on AWAs are denied long service leave and the majority of AWAs lack penalty rates.[2] Women, who are the majority of part-time and casual workers, are anticipated to fare especially badly under AWAs.

Women's employment continues to be the most affected by the demands of unpaid work and caring responsibilities. They are more in need of flexible working arrangements, yet are least likely to be able to access them. As more women have interrupted work patterns during the child rearing years, they will also have to participate more often in individual bargaining, each time risking the loss of particular conditions in agreements with new employers. The change to increased use of AWAs would appear to compromise the Australian government's commitment to balancing work and family by disadvantaging working parents, in particular women.

Risks associated with the Standard

Contrary to federal government claims that the Standard will enshrine in law family-friendly provisions for all workers, there is concern that in practice it will expose workers to more unfriendly work patterns and reduce their ability to negotiate flexible work provisions.

The new legislation will introduce a 38-hour working week averaged over an agreed period (up to and including 12 months). This could result in employees being asked to work 'reasonable' additional hours during peak periods without being paid overtime benefits. For example, an employer could insist on an employee working 50 hours in one week by claiming the extra hours are just part of the ordinary working week averaged over the 'agreed applicable averaging period'. Currently an employee can refuse to work overtime due to family responsibilities. However, under the averaging arrangements, if the additional hours are considered to be 'reasonable', an employee may lose their ability to refuse to work these extra hours, or to claim them as overtime. Alternatively employees may not be given blocks of time off during slow periods, but may instead have hours shaved off the beginning or end of a shift. This could significantly undermine the capacity of many employees to balance their work and family responsibilities.

An ACCIRT report[3], which highlighted the experiences of Victoria, Western Australia and New Zealand in the reform of their industrial relations systems, showed that the overwhelming majority of new individual workplace agreements focussed on changes to earnings and working hours. Agreements invariably provided open-ended hours of work, with management and business needs being the key drivers. A common approach was to expand the ordinary working time arrangements and thereby reduce penalty costs that would have previously been paid for working outside ordinary hours. The evidence from these jurisdictions strongly indicates that AWAs do not provide greater flexibility or better working conditions than collective agreements.

Research also shows that AWAs generally have inadequate provisions for parental leave. In 2004 only 11% of AWAs included maternity leave (paid or unpaid), and only 7% referred to paid maternity leave, with an average length of 6.1 weeks. There were no maternity leave provisions for casual workers, of which the majority are women. In addition, only 7% of employees with private sector AWAs had additional family-friendly rights, with more men (66%) than women (52%) with family leave entitlements written into their individual agreements, and fewer than half of employees (41% of women and 31% of men) with family-friendly flexibility written into their agreements.[4]

Section Three: The impact of Work Choices on employment conditions for women in casual employment.

Women, wages and casual employment

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines 'casual employee' as an employee who was 'not entitled to either annual leave or sick leave in their main job'. Of new full time jobs created since 1996, 42.3% have been casual and overall there are now more than 2.2 million casual workers — an increase of 22% since 1996.[5]

Women employees are concentrated in part-time and casual employment and are likely to be disproportionately affected by Work Choices. Of all women employed in Queensland in 2004, 46.2% worked in part-time or casual employment.[6] Small townships have the highest proportion of part-time employed women (54.3%) compared with 51.9% in rural areas and 46.5% in major urban centres.[7]

Throughout Australia 26% of all employed women are engaged casually, compared to 16% of men. Nearly half (48%) of all casual workers have their wages set by awards only.[8] Sixty percent of employees in the hospitality industry, 31% of retail employees and 27% of health and

community services employees rely on awards.[9] Women are overrepresented in these industries, with 87.5% of employed females aged 15–64 years working in service industries in 2001, compared to 64.8% of employed males in the same age group.

Award reliance is higher in rural and regional areas: about 50% of employees in rural and regional Queensland rely on state and federal awards.[10] These employees are likely to be women, unskilled, young and indigenous workers, in workplaces with low union density, in service industries, and in small business. There is concern that these vulnerable workers will be most at risk of being required to enter into collective agreements or AWAs that reduce their entitlements, either to obtain a new job or to keep their old one.

It is widely accepted that workers engaged in casual employment receive significantly fewer rights and benefits when compared to employees in standard permanent positions. In August 2004, 28% of employees, of whom 53% were women, did not have an entitlement to paid holiday and/or sick leave.[11]

Casual employment can benefit some employees by offering a higher degree of flexibility to suit their individual needs, particularly in the short term, however this benefit is compromised by a lack of employment security, greater risk of summary dismissal, variation in hours worked, underpayment, and a lack of capacity to accrue superannuation or to secure mortgages to enable housing stability. Where employees are engaged in casual employment for long periods of time they are also more vulnerable to inadequate skills formation through a lack of skill development pathways and a lack of opportunities for promotion.

To date, industrial awards and agreements in Queensland have provided for a casual loading of approximately 23%, which is higher than the default minimum casual loading percentage (20%) contained within Work Choices. This percentage may only be adjusted by the AFPC. Workers who are currently earning a higher casual loading rate risk reverting to the minimum rate once they are transitioned into the new system, or change employment.

In 1999 the Victorian Industrial Relations Taskforce, which examined the impact of Victoria's deregulation of employment and the handing over of its industrial powers to the Australian government, found that Victoria had developed a disproportionately large low wage sector, concentrated in small workplaces and in provincial Victoria. The odds of being in a low-wage category were three times as high for workplaces in the agricultural industry.[12]

Labour hire companies and independent contractors

Aligned with the increasing casualisation of the labour market generally, increasing numbers of people are being engaged by labour hire companies (the majority employed on a casual basis) or are operating as 'small business' independent contractors. The number of employees working under labour hire conditions increased five-fold between 1990 and 2003. In 2002, 290,115 workers were placed in temporary or contract employment by 2,700 labour hire organisations.[13] Communication services (such as call centres) and the manufacturing industry (process work and maintenance functions) use the most labour hire workers.[14]

Many people who are forced to leave permanent farming jobs (including unpaid family helpers) for reasons such as drought may become self-employed or independent farm labour contractors. The seasonal variations in farm work may also contribute to an increase in part-time employment.

Distinct advantages exist to employers when they choose to engage labour hire or independent contractors. First, they are able to exercise a greater control over hiring and firing decisions (circumventing unfair dismissal claims). Second, all legal obligations relating to direct employment no longer apply. Minimum wages, leave payments, superannuation payments and so on are replaced by a commercial contract. Additionally, administrative functions and associated costs can be reduced. The bargaining power is shifted substantially to the employer, leaving fewer protections or choices for workers.

In contrast, casual employees working for labour hire companies are covered by minimal industrial rights and may not have any entitlements to annual leave, sick leave, carers leave or parental leave. If employed casually, employees may have to take any leave as unpaid, with a commensurate loss of income and financial security. Independent contractors trade on a profit-or-loss basis and are therefore not entitled to a minimum wage. Contracts are often offered on a 'take-it or leave-it' basis, with low contract prices being accepted in an effort to secure income. Research has demonstrated that the combination of low contract prices, an increase in work intensification via tight deadlines, and pressure to meet contract delivery agreements, can result in poorer occupational health and safety outcomes.[15]

Research commissioned by the Department of Industrial Relations in Queensland shows other negative aspects of labour hire.[16] Women are overrepresented in precarious employment and there are negative occupational health and safety (OHS) consequences associated with precarious employment (including casuals and short-term contract workers as well as those employed under labour hire arrangements). There is evidence of increased levels of exposure to hazards and risks, extensive non-reporting of injuries/illnesses, cost shifting to taxpayer funded supports, diminished investment in OHS induction and training, and inappropriate/ineffective application of the OHS regulatory provisions. They also tend to return early to work after a work-related injury, as they are paid by their output. Further, many precariously employed workers with chronic injuries/illnesses are supported via the social security system rather than by workers' compensation. Therefore, labour hire employers are able to shift the risks and costs of employing workers to the labour hire company, but also (possibly) to the state and the taxpayer with regard to occupational health and safety.

The combination of a dismantled award system, only five minimum conditions being required under AWAs, a lack of certainty around decisions to be made by the AFPC regarding wage rates, and federal government proposals that foster a labour market hire environment, may serve to support the flourishing of casual employment within the labour market.

Section Four: The impact of Work Choices on employment conditions for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women, Indigenous women and young regional Queenslanders.

CALD and Indigenous women

The issues of award-setting, bargaining for individual agreements and loss of entitlements are likely to disproportionately affect women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Indigenous women. These groups of women are even more likely to be in casual, low paying positions with low bargaining power, and difficulties with language and literacy skills will make effective bargaining less likely. Migrant and refugee women with limited English skills or knowledge of their rights may have greater difficulty understanding agreements and may feel pressured to sign on the spot rather than taking the agreement home and seeking advice on it.

Under the pre-reform Workplace Relations Act 1996, a collective agreement could not be certified unless an explanation of its terms had taken place, in terms appropriate to the employee, including persons from a non-English speaking background and Indigenous persons. The AIRC refused to certify agreements that had not been adequately explained to people in their first language. However, because agreements are not subject to an approval process, this provision has been removed under Work Choices. This was an important protection for CALD and Indigenous women and its removal may send a message about the low priority given to them by the Government.

Workplace discrimination

CALD and Indigenous women are more likely to be victims of workplace discrimination based on racial prejudices.[17] Employees of an employer who employs 100 or fewer employees will be excluded from making an application for unfair termination and employers will not need to give a reason for termination. The new limitations will allow small and medium sized employers to virtually fire at will as few employers would state the reason for dismissal as being due to race, sex or pregnancy (unlawful reasons), when there is no need to give any reason.

Employees who are dismissed for an unlawful reason (for example on the grounds of race, sex, pregnancy) will still have redress under Work Choices. However, being able to make an application if dismissed for an unlawful reason gives little real protection as there are difficulties with proof and there are high costs for proceeding with a claim for unlawful termination, which is ultimately in the Federal Court. This approach is more time consuming and an intimidating process that may deter many employees, particularly CALD and Indigenous women. Low-earning women would be unlikely to be able to afford to litigate.

In this situation, workers who cannot afford private legal advice may become increasingly dependent on human rights and anti-discrimination bodies. The capacity of the Queensland Anti-discrimination Commission (ADC) to handle a significant increase in work-related complaints needs to be considered. In 2004–05 the ADC dealt with 1,118 complaints on accepted grounds, of which 61.8% were work or recruitment related.[18] In addition, the need for community organisations to provide information and counselling services on issues such as workplace discrimination is likely to increase with changes to the anti-discrimination regulations and the removal of unfair dismissal provisions.

On a positive note, the Senate Inquiry into the Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Bill 2005 recommended that outworker provisions in state awards be protected and not be able to be bargained away by employees entering into federal agreements. Amendments to Work Choices now mean that a workplace agreement must provide outworker conditions that are at least as favourable as the relevant award, and cannot displace those award provisions. This is beneficial to the many CALD women working as outworkers in the garment industry.

Impact on young workers in rural areas

The new workplace relations laws may also have a large impact on young people, particularly in rural areas where they are already at a disadvantage in terms of access to education, training, apprenticeship or employment opportunities. Young people also experience difficulties meeting Centrelink requirements due to factors such as distance to access services and problems with public transport, lack of places to apply for work, literacy problems, and a lack of advocates.[19] Those who grow up in low socioeconomic conditions are likely to experience even greater disadvantage.[20]

The number of full time positions available for young school leavers in rural areas has not increased between 1995 and 2005 and for young adults it has declined by 10%.[21] It has been estimated that approximately half a million young Australians are only marginally attached to education or employment. Employment opportunities in rural areas are also often in male dominated fields, which may contribute to more girls than boys expressing an intention to leave rural communities and being motivated to attend university.

Queensland has a substantially higher proportion than some other states of school leavers in rural areas who are not fully engaged in the year after leaving school, with female school leavers (34%) more likely to be neither studying nor working full-time than male school leavers (27%).[22] Females are also more likely to be in part-time work than males and more likely to not be in the labour force.

Apprenticeships offer women flexible education and training pathways to help them participate in the workforce, especially in non-traditional trades. However, the potential reduction of wages in real terms as a result of Work Choices may act as an additional disincentive to women who may be considering an apprenticeship. There is the added concern that the growth of labour hire and casualisation will exacerbate continuing under-investment in training for young people.

Conclusion

Queensland has demonstrated that strong and fair employment rights are an integral part of a successful economy:

- Queensland has high economic and employment growth. Queensland has delivered 46,000 additional jobs in the past 12 months, representing around 24% of the national jobs growth. We have a lower unemployment rate than the rest of Australia – 4.9% in December 2005, below the national average of 5.1%.
- The Queensland economy continues to outperform the national economy with economic growth in 2004–05 estimated to be 4.0%, almost double the national economic growth rate of 2.3%.
- Queensland continues to experience an historically low level of industrial disputes – the average quarterly strike rate for the year to September 2005 was 3.9 working days lost per thousand employees, less than the Australian average (5.9) and Victoria (6.8), which is under the federal industrial relations system.

Employees who are moved to the federal system under Work Choices will lose entitlements that exist under current state awards and agreements once the transitional period for notional or preserved agreements expires. Queensland awards will be rationalised and will cease to have effect for employees who are captured by the federal system, once a new agreement is made at a workplace.[23]

Because of their current standing in the labour market, women stand to be the biggest losers in terms of the Australian government's new industrial relations landscape – both in terms of pay and conditions

Where to seek advice

The Queensland Government remains opposed to the new federal industrial relations system outlined in the Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005 (Work Choices), passed by the federal Government on 14 December 2005. Subsequently, in November 2005, the Queensland Premier, the Honourable Peter Beattie MP, announced that an advisory service would be established to provide Queensland workers and their families with up to the minute information about the industrial reforms.[24], Now known as the Fair Go Queensland Advisory Service (FGQAS) it consists of an information hotline, the provision of additional financial support for independent community groups and the establishment of a new program to advise and assist unions and employers to develop collective, cooperative and productivity-focused industrial relations strategies.

The Information Hotline commenced operations on 5 December 2005. It can be accessed on 1300 737 841 across the State for the cost of a local call. The Hotline provides information to employers and employees on the Work Choices legislation, current Queensland award wages and conditions and how these awards will be affected by Work Choices.

The Department of Industrial Relations has also established a web site, http://www.dir.qld.gov.au/industrial/rights/system/index.htm to provide details of Work Choices and how the legislation affects employers and employees who have been transferred to the federal system. A booklet providing this information has also been printed and distributed: http://www.dir.qld.gov.au/pdf/ir/proposedfederallaws_booklet2005.pdf

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