

Media Release

Thursday, 8 November 2007

100th anniversary of Australia's first minimum wage case - a day to remember what we have lost under the Howard Government

Today, Thursday 8 November is the 100 year anniversary of the 'Sunshine Harvester' wage case decision and a timely reminder for Tasmanian workers of the damaging effects of Work Choices said the Unions Tasmania Secretary Simon Cocker.

In response to a union pay claim in 1907 Justice Higgins of the Industrial Relations Commission ruled that employees deserved a wage guaranteeing them a standard of living reasonable for "a human being in a civilised community".

The 'Sunshine Harvester' case was a landmark in Australian history and the first of its kind in the world. Justice Higgins set a minimum wage for unskilled workers of 7 shillings a week - around \$1.40 a week - which he deemed "enough to support the wage earner in reasonable and frugal comfort".

Last week Professor Ian Harper, the head of the Howard Government's new wages setting body confirmed that real wages for more than a million low paid workers have fallen by up to \$15.67 a week or \$814 a year under Work Choices this year.

Simon Cocker, Secretary of Unions Tasmania said:

"It's quite clear that the intent of the Howard Government's Work Choices model is to take Australia down the United States' path of large numbers of workers earning poverty-level wages. It must be scrapped to protect the well-being of our kids and grandkids.

"We've seen the story play out in Tasmania with companies like United Petroleum stripping away overtime, shift penalties, meal breaks, leave loading and public holiday payments. Workers lost up to \$190 a week out of their pay packets. The Liberal's IR laws made this behaviour legal.

"The legal requirement for fair minimum wages, along with Australia's unique independent umpire and award safety net have been major features of Australia's IR system for the past 100 years. They were overturned by the introduction of the Howard Govt's unfair Work Choices laws.

"Australia's minimum wage is now \$522.12 a week or \$13.74 an hour. The minimum wage would be \$50 less a week if the Howard Government had got its way in previous wage cases.

"With interest rates rising and petrol and food prices skyrocketing the Howard Government's only plan to deal with the problem is to try to reduce the wages of the most vulnerable workers in our society, particularly workers in the hospitality and retail sectors." said Mr Cocker

Media Contact: Simon Cocker 0419402377

379 Elizabeth Street
Hobart Tas 7000

PO Box 128
North Hobart Tas 7002

Telephone: (03) 6234 9553
Facsimile: (03) 6234 9505

Email: admin@unionstas.com.au

web-site: www.unionstas.com.au Secretary: Simon Cocker