

Media Alert

Sunday 16th September 2007

United Petroleum Employer Greenfields agreement - One year on and still no word from the Workplace Ombudsman as to whether it was legal. Why is it taking so long?

ACTU President Sharan Burrow visited Hobart today. She met with former United Petroleum employee David Polley, Unions Tasmania Secretary Simon Cocker as well as State Secretary of the AMWU Anne Urquhart for an update on the situation at United Petroleum. It is nearly a year since the Office of Workplace Services (now known as the Workplace Ombudsman) commenced its second investigation into the legality of the Norvac/United Petroleum Employer Greenfields Agreement. One year on the Workplace Ombudsman still cannot tell the workers at United if the Greenfields Agreement that was used to cut their pay and conditions was legal or not. Norvac/United Petroleum exploited a loophole in the Workchoices legislation to sign an Employer Greenfields agreement with itself that stripped out award conditions including public holiday pay, overtime payments, night and weekend shift penalties as well as meal breaks. Employees worked for a flat rate of \$14.33 an hour regardless of the time or day of their shift.

At a press conference after the meeting ACTU President Sharan Burrow said;

%After nearly twelve months of investigation from the OWS we still have no response from them as to the legality of this agreement. It is disgraceful that up to 90 workers around the state who lost pay and conditions have had to wait so long to find out if the agreement they were employed under was legal or not.+

%We've heard a horrific story of exploitation today from David Polley describing his working conditions at United. There is a story of stress here . financial, physical and mental stress.+

%The Federal Government is spending millions of dollars advertising its own agency the Office of Workplace Services but the agency has not done its job. Ninety Tasmanian workers are in limbo, still at the behest of Workchoices that was used to strip out their pay and conditions. Some of these workers lost \$190 a week. It should not take a year to get an answer.+

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Unions Tasmania Secretary , Simon Cocker, said:

We call upon the Workplace Relations Minister Joe Hockey to do something about this mess. Around ninety workers lost meal breaks, overtime, Saturday, Sunday and public holiday payments, annual leave loading and more. They are still waiting to hear if the agreement they were employed under was legal.

This is a bureaucratic nightmare. Before Workchoices these workers would have been able to get a hearing with the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. The case would have been heard in a timely fashion and been resolved within weeks. A year on we still have not clear idea if Norvac acted legally and these workers have paid the price for that.

Former United Petroleum Employee David Polley said:

I worked for three years for Mobil before United took over the station. When I worked with Mobil we had lunch breaks and we were paid fair Award rates. When you went home at the end of your shift that was the end of your working day. When United took over I would usually start work at 6am and still be going at 10pm at night, often 7 days a week and all for my base hourly rate of pay, no overtime no loadings.

One of the girls couldn't work on a Saturday because she had a child and they told me to sack her.

I was getting up to 27 phone calls a day, even when I was on sick leave. They even called me about work issues on my wedding day when I was on two weeks leave.

I was incredibly stressful. I would just lie awake at night feeling sick at the prospect of going in to work the next day. I finished up in December when they re-leased the station. My health has really suffered. I've lost 30kg and I think it's because of the stress.

Anne Urqhart, State Secretary of the AMWU said:

This kind of behaviour by employers affects whole communities. In regional areas it's not as simple as - if you don't like the pay and conditions find another job. People get beaten down. Often they are low skilled workers with no savings and no choice. There are very few jobs in regional areas for these people. They don't want to speak out because they are afraid they may never get another job. We are seeing a lot of people in Tasmania hurting because of these Workplace laws.

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