

E-BULLETIN Telecommunications

#4 Friday, 8th June 2007

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CEPU slams Telstra service centre closures

The CEPU has condemned Telstra's decision to close down most of its Service Advantage centres, a move that the union was only informed about at the very last minute.

Over a thousand people will lose their jobs as a result. The move will hit both Telstra employees and agency staff.

Telstra has announced it will rationalise both the physical centres and the work performed in them. The number of sites will be cut from 17 to 7, with work effectively concentrated in only four sites in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Townsville. Centres in Wollongong, Canberra, Launceston and Newcastle will close altogether.

Functions generally performed by Service Consultants (fault reporting) will be concentrated in Townsville and Perth. Service specialist work (testing, activation) will be centralised in Sydney and Melbourne.

Telstra has said it will consider redeployment possibilities for those affected. But as members would realise, in practice redeployment will not be an option for most of these workers. People who have family responsibilities in Launceston can't simply pull up stakes and move to Townsville. Testers facing redundancy in Perth can't easily move to Melbourne.

WorkChoices being used to push down pay and conditions

In fact, what Telstra really intends to do is to replace these current Service Advantage employees with new workers who will be employed on AWAs. Nearly one thousand new jobs are going to be created in the big centres – Townsville, Perth and Melbourne.

But they won't be award/Enterprise Agreement-based jobs. And the wages and conditions won't be those that Telstra's current staff enjoy.

There could be no clearer example of how WorkChoices enables a ruthless management to destroy conditions in an industry. Highly skilled and experienced workers will be thrown out of a job and their positions taken by new employees who have had a minimal amount of training and who will be employed on lower rates.

Under John Howard's laws, those new employees will in fact have no choice about whether they go an AWA on not – and AWA will simply be a condition of employment.

CEPU campaign

The CEPU has moved to draw public attention to this disgraceful attack by Telstra on its own employees and on industry conditions. The union has also called on the Government to provide the same level of assistance to affected workers as it has to miners and timber workers on other occasions.

After all, it is the Government's own privatisation policies that are driving Telstra, which now cares more about profits than people, whether they are staff or customers.

Harradine Hoodwinked

Telstra's decision to close the Launceston Service Advantage centre shows how hollow Brian Harradine's so-called achievements on behalf of Tasmania really have been.

Harradine's vote was crucial in gaining Senate support for the first round of Telstra privatisation. In return, Harradine was given assurances about Telstra jobs staying in Tasmania and about Tasmania not being left behind in the communications "revolution".

What has all that come to? Thousands more Telstra jobs have gone out of Tasmania since Harradine did his deal in 1996. And the state is set to be left behind in the next phase of broadband network roll-out (see story below).

Fortunately for him, Harradine has now left the political scene. But others who were part of this cynical deal to privatise Telstra i.e. Government members should be made to pay the price at the next Federal election.

Telstra and the Future Fund

Earlier this year the Federal Government boosted its Future Fund to more than \$50 billion after depositing \$8.9 billion of Telstra shares, i.e. it transferred its remaining 17% share stake in Telstra into the superannuation account. Effectively this means the fund has a controlling interest in Telstra.

The Howard Government is a conniving body of people, their utter commitment to big business seeing them involved in all manner of greed. Their latest act is in regard to the so-called Future Fund. The management of the Fund has been offshored to Northern Trust in the US.

Northern Trust, a multi-bank holding company with headquarters in the city of Chicago, was a trustee of the savings plan for the Enron employees' pension fund. Power corporation Enron went bust in 2002, leaving 20,000 workers without pensions, college funds and entitlements. Now Northern Trust has control of Australia's \$51 billion public servants' superannuation fund. Northern Trust was involved in a US\$37.5 million settlement last year in a class action by Enron employees. It will be paid \$15 million a year in fees. A Future Fund with no future, and maybe public servants with no super?

GPS support for union's campaign from above

An unprecedented solar eruption last December caused large numbers of GPS receivers to stop tracking the signal and may foreshadow worse outages in the future. That was the finding of the Space Weather Enterprise Forum at its first meeting on June 1 in Washington. On December 5 and 6 last year, forecasters of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration observed two powerful solar flares.

These solar flares injected high energy electrons into the solar upper atmosphere which produced radio waves that spread to Earth covering a broad frequency range. Those radio waves acted as a noise that degraded the signal used by GPS and other navigational systems.

Bush set to lose out on broadband

The Howard Government has moved to break the current deadlock between Telstra and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) over broadband network roll-out. It has announced that it will set up an expert panel to consider the Telstra and G9 consortium's rival proposals for Fibre to the Node (FTTN) network.

The G9 is led by SingTel Optus and is proposing a form of joint management of an FTTN network that would be owned by a separate group of investors (e.g. Macquarie Bank).

The CEPU does not think the G9 proposal is workable. But even if it was, there would still be a big policy problem. Neither the current Telstra proposal or the G9 plan extends beyond Australia's five major cities.

Tasmania misses out altogether. So does Canberra and the rest of regional and rural Australia. So much for the idea of universal service.

Peter Costello is boasting that the proposal the Government will back won't involve one cent of taxpayers money. But all that means is that a large part of the population will be left behind on broadband. The simple fact is that unless some form of subsidy or cross subsidy (from city customers, for instance) is available, no carrier will roll out high speed fibre networks to regional Australia.

The Nationals, as usual, seem to be asleep and to not understand what these policies mean for their constituents. At present, it is only the Labor party who is offering a national solution to the broadband puzzle.

Aussie Post privatisation back on the agenda?

A report by the investment arm of the Commonwealth Bank, CommSec, has said that Australia Post should be privatised. The report, released earlier this week, triggered a round of speculation about whether the Howard Government was planning such a move if it wins the next election.

The CEPU immediately called on the Government to make its position clear and warned that privatisation of Post would mean a decline in service quality and the loss of thousands of jobs.

The Government responded that it had "no plans" to sell Post. But as members would appreciate, this is rather different from making a commitment not to privatise.

In fact, although the Government backed off from its attempts some years ago to deregulate the postal market, it has never abandoned these policies. And deregulation and privatisation go hand in hand, as telecoms members well know.

The fact is that the Howard Government cannot be trusted to protect postal services and more than it can be trusted to ensure that all Australians have access to high speed broadband services – another reason why they should be thrown out of office at the next election.

No cheap umpire for Howard’s “fairness test”

The ACTU has identified another problem with the Howard Government’s new “fairness test”, the process that is supposed to ensure that workers on AWAs aren’t disadvantaged. This time it’s the cost of challenging the “fairness” of the AWA.

Under the “fairness test”, the Government’s new Workplace Authority (formerly called the Office of Workplace Relations) is supposed to check all AWAs signed since May 7th to make sure they are “fair” and that employees are receiving appropriate compensation for any conditions (penalty rates, public holidays) they give up.

Legal advice obtained by the ACTU says that the only way an employee could challenge the decision of the Workplace Authority would be by going to the High Court – a step that would cost thousands of dollars.

The ACTU claims that anyone mounting such a challenge could expect to pay at least \$25,000 to get their day in court. How fair is that?

No clear criteria for “fairness”

The Government’s answer is that workers should simply accept the Workplace Authority’s decision. But in practice, those decisions are going to be highly subjective.

Under the “fairness test”, AWAs don’t have to provide financial compensation for the loss of overtime payments, penalty rates, public holidays and other award entitlements. “Compensation” could take the form of free coffee at meal breaks, for instance (see story below). How is the Workplace Authority going to decide whether this is fair or not?

The other problem is the sheer number of AWAs that have to be looked at. These are now being registered at the rate of around 1,000 a day. Even with extra staff, how is the Workplace Authority going to make reasonable and considered judgements about the fairness of all these contracts?

Election ploy

There fact is that the Government doesn’t care whether or not there is a good answer to these questions. It is only interested in trying to convince voters that it is doing something about its unpopular workplace laws.

The “fairness test” is nothing but window dressing for the forthcoming election and will do nothing to stop the erosion of working conditions and living standards that is at the heart of the Howard Government’s agenda.

Women worse off on AWAs: study

Findings that women employees are paid less than men under WorkChoices AWAs. The National Foundation for Australian Women has just released a report on the nation’s gender pay gap widened in the year to November 2006, with the biggest gap in Western Australia, the state with the highest rate of AWAs. Women’s average weekly full time earnings as a percentage of men’s was 75% in WA, compared to 84% nationally.

The report said the first significant deterioration in the relative pay of women in Western Australia coincided with the introduction of individual bargaining in that state, and the experience mirrored that of New Zealand under previous government laws.

In addition the report found that gender wage inequality was worse in part-time and casual employment, and AWAs were most common in the retail sector, where there has been little if any wage growth.

The report recommended the adoption of paid maternity leave rights, better auditing of wage data and provision of more information on workplace rights to employees.

Howard Government's Workplace Laws to be examined by ILO for third year in a row

The Howard Government's workplace laws will be examined at a hearing later this week into whether they comply with international labour standards.

A list of 25 alleged international labour rights offenders, including the Howard Government's workplace laws, will be considered in Geneva by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a special agency of the United Nations that monitors labour standards.

The ACTU's Sharan Burrow in a recent media release:

- “Australia is a signatory to the international convention on fundamental labour rights.
- Someone should be asking the Minister, Joe Hockey, why his Government's workplace laws do not comply with international human rights to which it is a signatory?
- The ILO is taking the Howard Government to task because it is one of few governments among advanced countries whose workplace laws are alleged to breach freedom of association & the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.
- These are fundamental human rights that are laid down in the 1998 ILO ‘Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights of Work’ that also include the elimination of forced labour, the abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.
- Australian working families already know that the Howard Government's IR laws are unfair and they now should know that the unfairness of the laws has not escaped international attention,” said Ms Burrow

Gimme a break ... or don't

Australians are working harder than ever before and cutting back on the leave they take.

The seventh annual Vacation Deprivation Survey, taken in March and April, undermines the popular perception of the laid-back Aussie lifestyle, filled with beachside barbecues and beer.

It said 37 per cent of workers in Australia didn't use all of their annual leave in 2006/07, beating the United States, where the figure was 35 per cent.

“This is the transformed image of the bronzed Aussie to emerge from a new global survey on holidays that shows Australians rank last in the western world when it comes to taking their full leave allowance,” said the Sydney Morning Herald.

And the latest data backs up what the Federal Government's own Tourism Australia released in research last year which revealed work pressure was to blame for the nation's employees having accrued around 70 million days of annual leave.

Australian's receive the second-least number of holiday days each year, getting an average of just 18 days off. The only employees getting a worse deal are those in the US, who receive a mere 14 days each year.

The survey sponsor, on-line travel company Expedia, says the findings "explode" the myth that Australians are laid back and holiday loving.

The Herald also quotes Macquarie University occupational psychologist Dr Ben Searle who states evidence was emerging that working for extended periods without taking time off "to recharge" could lead to mental and social problems, "and in extreme cases even death".

But in some cases employers are knocking back our member requests for leave – even if the employee gives two to three months notice of leave.