National education and union news



Push for extra week of annual leave for workers

Australian Unions have launched a major new bid to secure an extra week of annual leave for working Australians.

Unions will pursue an increase in annual leave entitlements from four to five weeks per year and from five to six weeks for regular shift workers, in what would be the first increase in the minimum standard since the mid-1970s.

Unions will argue that annual leave should be increased to counter rising work pressures and the long hours of unpaid work that Australians regularly perform.

Australian workers carry out an extra 4.5 weeks' work every year on average, for free as unpaid overtime. Younger workers aged 18-24 perform the most unpaid overtime at 6.4 weeks per year, on average, according to the Centre for Future Work.

By increasing annual leave by a week, Australians would get back at least one week of their unpaid work through annual leave to reclaim time away from work.

While Australians work longer hours, the gap between productivity and real wages has widened. Real wages would need to increase by an additional 10 per cent to catch up to increases in productivity since 2000 and close the gap that has opened up over the last two and a half decades, based on analysis by the Centre for Future Work. Allowing workers an extra week of leave would help with closing that gap.

Increasing annual leave by one week would add an extra two per cent to employment costs that would be offset by a reduction in employee turnover and time lost to injury and stress.

Most European countries now provide more annual leave for their citizens than Australia does, including Austria, Germany, France, Spain and Portugal, as well as Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Unions will press for changes to the National Employment Standards (NES) to bring in the extra week's annual leave, as part of a House of Representatives Inquiry into the NES that is about to get underway.

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus said Australians worked relatively long hours, which had only increased over time, but yet the four-week annual leave standard was set 50 years ago.

“Extra leave will decrease stress and burnout,” she said.

“Australian workers already do an extra four and a half weeks of unpaid work on average every year. Getting back one of these weeks is fair and reasonable. It will mean a better rested and happier workforce.

“Countries like Austria, France and Spain have already recognised the importance of rested, healthier employees and have higher rates of annual leave than Australia does. They are some of the most productive and competitive economies in the OECD.

“It’s time Australia caught up, our annual leave has been frozen at four weeks since the mid-1970s, half a century ago. Most workers weren’t alive when annual leave last went up in Australia.”



Teachers need time to plan and collaborate: survey

A comprehensive survey of almost 20,000 NSW teachers shows the overwhelming majority lack sufficient time to meet the growing needs of today’s students.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) has commenced a statewide awareness push, meeting with members, parents and politicians across NSW to present evidence from 18,613 teachers who say they are being stretched beyond capacity and hear the concerns of local communities.

Key findings from its survey include:

- Only 15 per cent of teachers have enough time for lesson planning.
- Fewer than one in 10 teachers have time to collaborate with colleagues.
- Just seven per cent of teachers have adequate time for curriculum programming.

“Fewer than one in 20 teachers say they have enough time to do the work required to meet the needs of today’s students,” NSWTF President Henry Rajendra said.

“It’s not just teachers sounding the alarm. Parents know this is a serious problem and want it fixed so that their kids get a teacher who has had the time to plan for the needs of their students.

“This is about having the time to do the professional work that today’s students need – planning quality lessons, collaborating with colleagues, and addressing student wellbeing.”

The survey found more than 93 per cent report not having enough time to address student wellbeing matters, 95 per cent

cite “emotional/physical fatigue” as the main consequence of insufficient time and more than 91 per cent say they don’t have time to collaborate with colleagues.

Despite increasing classroom complexity, teacher preparation time has not changed for primary teachers since the 1980s and the 1950s for secondary teachers.

In 2021, the expert Gallop Inquiry recommended providing teachers an additional two hours of preparation time. Yet since then, the number of students with disability in NSW public schools has risen to more than 220,000 – a 75 per cent increase. With 86 per cent of students with disability learning in mainstream settings, classrooms have never been more complex.

“The NSW Government has made meaningful progress such as delivering historic pay increases driving teacher shortages to their lowest levels in more than a decade,” Mr Rajendra said.

“We’ve shown we can work together. Now it’s time to finish the job and commit to the additional preparation time teachers desperately need.”



Unions put corporate Australia on notice about AI

Australian Unions are warning employers they will be ramping up their campaign insisting employers are transparent and follow their legal obligations to consult the minute they choose to adopt artificial intelligence (AI).

Employers who do not abide by their legal obligation to consult workers when a decision is made to introduce AI will face an ACTU-led coordinated response.

The ACTU has written to employer peak bodies reminding them of their obligations under the law and to consult with workers when they decide to adopt AI, where it is likely to change employees’ jobs or how they do them.

Many union-negotiated enterprise agreements contain stronger clauses that require consultation before a decision is made, or with more specific requirements around AI. However, these basic legal obligations to immediately consult apply to all employers.

Artificial intelligence, automated decision-making systems and algorithmic management tools are being rapidly introduced across Australian workplaces, with the potential to significantly alter how work is performed, how workers and monitored and assessed, and the skills required to perform work.

Australian creative workers, journalists and academics have already endured massive disruptions to their industries and multi-national AI companies have engaged in the wholesale theft of workers’ output.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Joseph Mitchell said: “Australia is not America. Australian workers have strong rights that require employers to immediately and transparently engage with their workforce and work out how they will avoid job losses and

retrain their workforce.”

“Employers have an obligation in law to meaningfully consult with workers and their representatives as soon as a decision is made to introduce AI and before its implementation,” he continued.

“Consultation is a clear requirement of Australian employers, and the ACTU will coordinate a response to any employer who does not abide by their legal obligation, placing themselves at risk of disputation proceedings and reputation damage.

“Workers do not want to see mass sackings as a result of AI being brought in, workers have a right to a say in how technology is introduced into the workplace.”

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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