

Opinion

Workers' Voice – a Matter of Life and Death

Liam O'Brien¹

Abstract

Only collective worker voice can ensure fair wages and safe workplaces and also protect dignity and diversity at work. The decline in real wages and collective bargaining in recent years is the result not only of inflation but the collapse of collective bargaining and an unfair industrial relations system that allows the suppression of wages through loopholes, as highlighted by Qantas' use of labour hire. Loopholes in the system also create unsafe and even deadly workplaces as shown by the ongoing issues with silicosis caused by handling engineered stone.

Key words

Workers' voice, wage stagnation, industrial relations, collective bargaining, labour hire, Qantas labor practices, silicosis, workers' rights.

¹ Assistant Secretary, Australian Council of Trade Unions.

For over a decade, nearly all productivity growth has been taken in profits² and now working people are struggling to make ends meet. More recently, since Australia emerged from the pandemic, real wages have declined by 6%.³ At the end of 2023, real wages dropped to below the level they were at in 2010 when the Fair Work Act was introduced.⁴ That's more than a decade of real wage growth completely wiped out.

Whilst the major factor in this has been the massive growth in inflation, driven by profit taking and price gouging, which has significantly raised the cost of living and placed extraordinary pressure on working people, we have to also acknowledge that knocking off 13 years of real wage growth in just over 2 years should not have been so easy and it is a reflection that our industrial relations system has been failing to deliver a fair go for working people in this country for some time.

Much of this failure is due to collective bargaining and, more importantly, its collapse over the last decade. Now, whilst the Albanese Government has started the job to repair and modernise our bargaining system with the passage of the Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Act 2022, there is much more to be done and that is because the problem with bargaining is much more than just ensuring we have a system that is flexible and works for all sectors and workers. We need a system that is fair: one that ends the loopholes that some of our country's biggest businesses have been

² The ABS national accounts shows that between June 2012 and June 2019 real compensation per hour worked barely rose while productivity increased steadily: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian National Accounts: National Income, Expenditure and Product (Catalogue No 5206.0, 6 December 2023) <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/national-accounts/australian-national-accounts-national-income-expenditure-and-product/latest-release>>; Australian Council of Trade Unions. (2023, September 29). Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing the Loopholes) Bill 2023. Retrieved January 30, 2024, from <https://www.actu.org.au/policies-publications-submissions/fair-work-legislation-amendment-closing-the-loopholes-bill-2023/>.

³ Analysis by the Australia Institute of ABS data (ABS 6401.06345.0) shows that from Sep 2020–June 2023 real wages declined by 6.25%: The Australia Institute (2023, February 9). *Despite stronger nominal growth, wages have now fallen in real terms for 3 years*. [The Australia Institute website]. Retrieved from <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/despite-stronger-nominal-growth-wages-have-now-fallen-in-real-terms-for-3-years/>. It is good to see real wages no longer falling but we have a long way to go.

⁴ Analysis by the Australia Institute of ABS (ABS 6401.06345.0) and RBA show the loss of real wages from March 2020 to 2023 shows more than a decade of real wages loss: The Australia Institute (2023, February 22). *The destruction of real wages will take a long time to recover*. [The Australia Institute website]. Retrieved from <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/the-destruction-of-real-wages-will-take-a-long-time-to-recover/>.

using to undermine collective bargaining and suppress wages –loopholes that have allowed employers to tip the balance even further in their favour.

This includes businesses like Qantas that have used labour hire to apply different rates of pay to different members of cabin crew on the same flight. Qantas has split its cabin crew workforce across 14 companies and contractors. On some Qantas domestic flights, you might see as many as five different rates of pay for the same classification. All of these employees work for different Qantas subsidiaries.

These are not only loopholes that enable Qantas and other businesses the ability to circumvent collective bargaining and suppress wages – these loopholes strike at the very heart of workers having a voice. The fissuring of workplaces by employers, enabled by these loopholes, undermines workers' collective voice and tips the balance even further in favour of big business. And voice is important. It is after all a fundamental principle and right at work underpinned by International Labour Organization conventions ensuring freedom of association and the right to organise and collectively bargain.⁴ Having a voice at work is critically important to working people and the very basis upon which unions exist.

As unionists, we know that work is a critical part of the human existence and whilst not for everyone, for many, work defines who we are, it is an outlet for us to express ourselves and is often inherent in our identity. Our work is a reflection of our abilities, underpinned by knowledge and skills that we have worked hard to develop over many years. Having a say in our work and how it is organised is critical to working people.

As I've outlined already, work is also the place where we sell our labour in exchange for wages, a wage that should provide for a decent and dignified existence, a wage that represents a fair and reasonable share of the income generated by those that we work for and ourselves. So voice is critical and whether or not working people have a voice or, more importantly, an actual say in work not only shapes their lives but it can also be the difference between life or death.

This is no more evident than when we think about another fundamental principle and right at work – the right to a safe and healthy working environment. You may have been following the campaign of unions in relation to the rise of silicosis and in particular the work of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union in relation to engineered stone. For years, we have been hearing about the plight of stonemasons working with this deadly product. Reports have said that, in some states, we have seen as many as one in four stonemasons who have worked with this product having contracted silicosis, a product that, it should be noted, is not an essential material but a shiny fashion item.

Silicosis is a deadly, incurable but entirely preventable lung disease. It is caused by inhaling crystalline silica dust. When you cut, grind or drill engineered stone, the fine-grained dust fills the air you breathe and penetrates deep into your lungs. Victims describe it as like being strangled from the inside. These workers are being killed and they are being killed for a fashion product.

As individuals, these workers have no voice. They work in small, largely non-union factories, scattered throughout the suburbs of our major cities. It has been unions, as the collective voice of workers, that have lent their voice to this crisis, exposing the appalling practices of manufacturers who failed to warn workers and who failed to implement controls that would have kept them safe. These voices have exposed regulators who failed to hold manufacturers and employers accountable for exposing workers to this deadly dust. If it were not for these voices there would be silence. It highlights that there are serious consequences in having a system of industrial relations that fails to support, enable and promote workers' voices. It also highlights that fundamental workers' rights are both indivisible and interdependent. Moreover, that the fundamental right to a safe and healthy working environment is only as good as the fundamental rights, and capacity, to organise.

Finally, for our movement, these examples show that workers' voices are not just nice to have, they are an essential part of the system and the system needs to actively promote, enable and support workers voices in all of their diversity.

Declaration of interests

No relevant interests to declare.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in the Journal of Work and Ideas are those of the authors only. They do not represent the views of the journal, its editors, nor the AIER.