

Workers deserve more

Caregivers of elderly people take action

PARTY SCENE
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There is a growing level of discontent amongst workers negotiating pay increases.

Last week we saw Dunedin elderly care workers at Redroofs Rest Home picketing along Highgate over the 1 per cent payrise offered them. Most Redroofs workers earn between \$13.61 and \$14.20 an hour. These workers do a job requiring skill and dedication. The pay offer they've been made will not keep pace with the rising cost of living. It is no surprise they are upset. Shortly before that, Talley's-AFFCO started locking 750 of its workers out around the country. It wants employees to accept

insecure jobs in place of the more secure conditions they currently have.

Before that, Ports of Auckland was in the spotlight for demanding its staff accept poorer contracting conditions as it seeks to hit new profit targets. Of course, industrial unrest is not new. It comes and goes. New Zealand has seen more bloody times, and it has enjoyed more harmonious times, but it is worrying, to see discontent growing.

At one level, negotiations between workers and employers are a private matter, and should be left to run their course. But at another level, the Government has got to take some responsibility for what is going on. Here are three reasons why. First: the Government has weakened protections for workers since 2008. More ruthless, corporate employers are taking advantage of this. Overtime rates are being cut. Staff safety is compromised with reduced numbers on shifts.

"Casualisation" is demanded and so workers with families can't be sure next week's pay cheque will suffice. Second: the economy is underperforming, so there's less money to go around. GDP per capita has shrunk since National took office. The economy is going backwards, and they don't seem to have a plan to change things. (You can't sell your way to a brighter future.) Third: the Government promised more.

Most Kiwis are hard-working. They are mindful of the difficult times we live in. Many are working extra hours and are trying hard to save, but just don't feel they're getting ahead. Redroofs Rest Home is one of 59 similar facilities owned by private equity firm Oceania Group. After eight months of negotiations with no progress, 1500 staff across the country are taking action. I wish them well.

David Clark is the Labour MP for Dunedin North.