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New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

Teaching and Education Legislation Amendment (Employment) Bill 2017

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I make a brief contribution today on the Teaching and Education Legislation Amendment (Employment) Bill 2017. I do so as a teacher who worked for 25 years as a casual on rolling temporary contracts across Sydney, the Blue Mountains and the Hawkesbury region in the years before I was elected to this place.

It is this particular aspect of the bill that I wish to address.

While I note that most of the measures in this bill are simple, practical ones, some changes are made to the manner in which casual teachers may be employed in schools in New South Wales.

Casual and temporary workers are a forgotten group in our public conversation about jobs, wages and employment. Governments often pat themselves on the back for reducing unemployment, but the hidden truth is that often the headline "unemployment rate" is disguising the fact that a huge section of our community is underemployed or not enjoying the benefit and security of permanent work to which they are entitled. This was brought into focus at a national level in recent weeks when the Fair Work Commission upheld the right of big business to refuse to offer their long-term casual employees the chance to convert to permanent part-time or full-time employment. The Australian Council of Trade Unions Secretary Sally McManus pointed out:

"This decision shows how hopelessly broken our workplace laws are"

Likewise, examples exist in the State's public sector—in particular, teaching—where all too often the system is built on an assumed component of permanent casual workers.

In the scheme of things, New South Wales should be an employer of choice. The public sector is one of the largest employers not only in this State but across

the country. That means it must set the best possible example as an employer and it must signal to other employers the value it places on the continuation of its workers.

It also means that there can be no further example of creeping casualisation in our public sector workforce. The Department of Education must make it as easy as possible for teachers who want permanent work to secure it.

As a proud member of the NSW Teachers Federation and an active member of the Blue Mountains Unions Council, I am aware of a number of examples of hardworking teaching colleagues who are on rolling temporary contracts in our schools who yearn for a permanent substantive teaching position. This is about feeling and being valued by the system.

Permanent work is the unspoken missing piece of the puzzle in housing affordability, as has been mentioned already in this place. There is no point creating additional housing supply when a whole section of our society cannot take out a mortgage to buy a home. How can a family keep up with growing rents, save for a deposit or even qualify for a mortgage if the main source of income is a casual wage in a professional field for which they spent four to five years training at university?

Permanent employment is the unspoken missing piece of the puzzle in arresting the growing problem of economic inequality. How can a single parent set aside money for a rainy day to pay the car registration each year or replace broken white goods when they do not have a reliable income? This is the life I lived for 25 years as a casual teacher. Many of the casual teachers I came across lived similar lives.

It is near impossible to keep your head above water when your pay fluctuates each fortnight or one faces many weeks with no income if the phone does not ring with another offer of a short-term appointment. This is what pushes households into high levels of credit card debt and financial hardship.

We must remain hyper vigilant against creeping casualisation and we must push to make the security of permanent employment available for every worker who requires it, and it must start in the New South Wales public sector.

As a member of the NSW Teachers Federation, I acknowledge and recognise its work in fighting for better pay and conditions for my colleagues in the teaching profession, as well as its support and advocacy on behalf of temporary and casual teachers.

While the temporary contract component of this amendment is a good step forward and should be acknowledged, it is the precarious or insecure situation and the lived experience of many workers that must be acknowledged today.

That is what we are here for.