In this edition of the Workers Solidarity Bulletin we look at the federal government’s Religious Discrimination Bill.

A second draft of the bill, released late last year, was heavily criticized by church and community groups as well as unions. Opponents of the bill recognise that it will give discriminatory powers to employers and actually threaten our religious freedom on the job. Read on for more.

As always we welcome your feedback at: 
we.are.workers.solidarity@gmail.com

WIN: ETU, UWU - Thales

ETU members at defence contractor Thales have won a $31 per week Electrical Licence Allowance on top of a 9% pay rise. Other workers including UWU members have got a 9% pay rise (3% per year) and maintained the same number of breaks and the same length of shifts. This is part of a 3 year agreement covering hundreds of workers from various unions at the Garden Island navy base. This agreement is an improvement on the initial proposed agreement after workers walked off for 2 hours and imposed an overtime ban.

MUA - DP World

DP World has been to the Federal Court and an interim injunction has been issued banning 1800 workers at Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and Fremantle terminals from taking any industrial action (including protected action) until 13 March 2020. DP World claimed that the MUA’s ongoing protected action (stoppages and bans) were in response to an unlawful claim around outsourcing. The MUA denies this, and sees the injunction as the latest in a range of aggressive moves from DP World including canceling leave for dozens of wharfies during the school holidays and banning workers from meeting with union reps on company property. Negotiations for the workplace agreement have been going on for more than 15 months.

RTBU - Vline

More industrial action is taking place at Vline. January 29 saw all Geelong & Warrnambool line trains stopped, and the Bendigo, Echuca and Swan Hill lines will stop on February 7. Indefinite bans on overtime on Mondays and Fridays started from January 31.

RTBU - Metro

48 train drivers have been stood down for refusing to drive on a new section of track on the Frankston, Cranbourne and Pakenham lines.
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John Connors, IEU and VicTas
Rank and file member

How long have you been a union member?
37 years.

Why did you join the union?
I joined the Union when I first started working—it was a ‘no-brainer’ really, I knew I just had to join. My parents saw Unionism as a positive thing so I had no hesitation in signing up. I knew of the benefits of joining a union; training, support and protection particularly. But the idea of belonging to a collective that could work to improve conditions certainly sat well with my value set.

What’s your best memory/story about being in the union movement?
I think the best memory I have was seeing the number of people that took strike action a few years back when the representative of the employers had been quite threatening in communications with staff throughout the organisation, particularly to those in leadership (like myself). To arrive at the Exhibition Buildings and see so many people ignore the threats, walk together as one and fight for a fair deal, was awe-inspiring.

What’s the most important issue facing the union movement today?
At the present time, the attitude of the federal government is presenting us the biggest issue(s). Both the Ensuring Integrity Bill and the Religious Freedom Bill stem from this attitude – the former aimed directly at unions and the latter affecting many workers in religious organisations (schools, hospitals, etc).

Why should people join their union?
In the current climate, the number one reason to join a union is for protection; protection of conditions, protection of remuneration and protection of employment.
Under new laws proposed by the Federal Government, religious institutions can discriminate against workers, customers and service users, in education, health care, social services and in some commercial entities.

The Religious Discrimination Bill allows religious hospitals, aged-care facilities and accommodation providers such as retirement homes the ability to discriminate against staff on the basis of religion to preserve their “religious ethos”.

The implications of this for workers are significant. The obvious ones are in hiring practices where religious schools and hospitals can legally avoid discrimination claims against them when choosing not to hire qualified staff if they don’t share the religious beliefs of the institution, even when their role does not require that belief: for example, maths and science teachers in religious schools, or any medical and allied health staff in religiously affiliated hospitals.

“What this law does is erode the division between Church and State, and foment divisions within the working class.”

Workers Solidarity acknowledges that our activities take place on Aboriginal Land. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.
And while these forms of discrimination are seemingly prohibited under current laws, the new Religious Discrimination Bill means that where a maths or science teacher discusses evolution or challenges creationism, and where this goes against the religious ethos of that school, they can be reprimanded or even terminated. In health services, this could mean that doctors can lawfully refuse to provide whole and complete medical advice about contraception, safe sex practices and pregnancy terminations.

Workers, particularly women workers, fought long and brutal battles for equal entry to the workforce - a victory that enabled women’s financial freedom from men. Contraception and safe access to abortions - in other words, women’s control of our bodies - is critical to our ongoing participation in the workforce, our freedom from financial oppression, and our physical safety from violent relationships.

Freedom from religious discrimination is already protected under current state, national and international laws. Freedom of religion is important. We all deserve to be protected from discrimination based on our choice of religion. But we also deserve to be protected from discrimination based on our choice not to be religious, or to be religious only to the extent that we agree with our religion, or to the degree that it’s convenient for us. Parents of children in religious schools who have separated, or have remarried, or are homosexual, have the right to know that their children will not be chastised by teachers or principals. As this proposed law stands, schools can lawfully discriminate against these children, and teachers that express a religious opinion about their parents’ lifestyles, are protected in doing so.

What this law does is erode the division between Church and State, and foment divisions within the working class. All workers - those that work in these industries, and those that use services in these industries - should oppose the Religious Discrimination Bill. It is divisive, it erodes the division of Church and State, and religious freedom is already protected under current laws.

All workers everywhere have the right to be religious. And the right not to be religious.