



Workplace flexibility essential: ACTU

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More flexibility in the workplace will help ease the skills shortage in Australia, the peak union body says.

In its final submission to the landmark work and family test in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, the ACTU said by making workplaces more flexible it would enable families with caring responsibilities to better juggle work and home commitments.

"Evidence presented by the ACTU in the test case shows that helping people to balance their work and family life will keep the Australian economy strong by retaining important workplace skills, increase the size of the workforce and reduce the impact of an ageing population," ACTU president Sharan Burrow said.

She said business groups were doing their members a "disservice" by opposing the ACTU claims.

"Business groups should change their tune and stop opposing family-flexible measures that could help ease the skills shortage," she said.

The ACTU also released the results of a childcare phone survey carried out during September and October, with 396 people responding.

The survey showed widespread support among working parents for the push by unions for more flexible workplaces, with 48 per cent of parents saying they wanted more flexibility in their workplaces and 35 per cent wanting more government help with childcare.

The ACTU is calling for a range of improvements for working families, including the doubling of unpaid parental leave from 12 to 24 months and the right for employees to return to part-time work after having a baby.

Unions also want employees to be given the option to "buy" up to six weeks' extra annual leave through salary sacrifice and to request alternative start and finish times at work.

Hearings into the landmark test case began in September with unions and business groups slugging it out over proposals to make the workplace more family-friendly.

On Tuesday, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry said in its final submission a bounce in Australia's fertility rate debunks the union claims that work pressures are forcing working couples to delay parenthood.

ACCI chief executive Peter Hendy said fertility data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showed a 2.9 per cent increase in the number of children born in Australia over the past year.

He said it was the biggest jump in births since 1991.

The ACCI said union claims would impact negatively on small and medium businesses and were outside the jurisdiction of the AIRC.

It said if the claims were granted it would have multiple adverse effects on business such as less certainty about staffing, less efficiency, increased costs, and would lead to more disputes and force managers and small business owners to work longer hours.

The final closing oral submissions will conclude this week.

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