

TUE 06 AUGUST 2019

Daily Media Overview



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06 Aug 2019

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

Author: Dana McCauley • Section: General News • Article type : News Item
Classification : Capital City Daily • Audience : 74,348 • Page: 9 • Printed Size: 412.00cm²
Region: NSW • Market: Australia • ASR: AUD 29,977 • Words: 634
Item ID: 1154897858

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GLOBAL SHOCKWAVES

‘An act of vandalism’: Senate urged to block union-busting bill

Dana McCauley

The world's top union leader says the Morrison government's union-busting legislation has sent "shockwaves around the world", calling on the Senate crossbench to block it to protect workers' rights.

Sharan Burrow, a former Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president who is general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, said the fact that "a democratic country like Australia could actually pass such a bill" sent the wrong message to developing nations.

"Somebody ought to be calling out the absolute overstepping of the mark by this elected government. It's unions today, who's next?" Ms Burrow told *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

"It is the sort of legislation that we expect from authoritarian countries or dictatorships ... When Australia takes such a stand, it sets back the struggles of workers everywhere in authoritarian governments for the very standards that people looked up to Australia for.

"It's extraordinary to think that Australia would dip to the standards of authoritarian control when in fact we have a strong rule of law that is capable of dealing with any misdemeanour of any individual in any walk of life."

The Ensuring Integrity Bill, which would make it easier for the

government to deregister unions and disqualify officials if they breached industrial relations laws, passed in the lower house last week. Its fate now rests with the Senate crossbench.

First introduced in 2017, the amended bill has a greater chance of passing in the Senate this time around due to the smaller cross-

bench since the election and controversy over John Setka's refusal to stand down as CFMMEU Victorian branch secretary after pleading guilty to harassing his wife via abusive text messages. Just one vote is needed from either Tasmanian senator Jacqui Lambie, or one of two Centre Alliance senators, for the bill to become law.

Ms Burrow, whose organisation represents more than 207 million workers, said it would be "over-reach" for the Parliament to respond to concerns about Mr Setka by eroding human rights.

"If there are individuals who are under scrutiny or have been charged or are in the process of being dealt with by the rule of law, then that's as it should be," she said.

Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter hit back, saying it was "ridiculous" to suggest that the bill would affect unionism in other countries.

"It simply requires that registered organisations and their officials in Australia conduct them-

selves according to Australian law," Mr Porter said.

Government MPs who make up a majority on a parliamentary human rights committee that scrutinises legislation voted for the bill on Wednesday despite say-

ing two days earlier that it put workers' rights at risk.

The committee backed the ACTU in raising concerns about the bill's interaction with Australia's obligation under international law to safeguard freedom of association, including the right for unionists to elect their own officials.

Ms Burrow dubbed the legislation "an extraordinary act of vandalism really in terms of the democratic rights and freedoms of Australia".

"Nobody can look at this with an objective eye and say it is anything but an act of some sort of ideological revenge," she said, warning that the bill would do "far-reaching damage to our democratic structures".

"I would say to the Senate, please protect our democracy."

Debate over the legislation has played out against the backdrop of a push by Labor leader Anthony Albanese to expel Mr Setka from the ALP. Mr Setka is challenging the bid to expel him in the Federal Court. The militant Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union was fined more than \$4.2 million last financial year for repeatedly contravening the Fair



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Work Act.

The upper house will vote on the bill after a Senate inquiry into the legislation reports back in October.

International
Trade Union
Confederation
general secretary
Sharan Burrow.
Photo: Wayne
Taylor

