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Abstract
Text of a Keynote Address delivered by Mike Donaldson at the 'Our Work Our Lives' National Women and Industrial Relations Conference, Rydges Hotel, Brisbane, 12–14 July 2006.

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So What About the Blokes?
Fathers, Husbands, Workers under WorkChoices

Mike Donaldson

[The following is the text of a Keynote Address delivered by Mike Donaldson at the 'Our Work Our Lives' National Women and Industrial Relations Conference, Rydges Hotel, Brisbane, 12–14 July 2006]

According to the Forbes Rich List in 2005 there were 691 billionaires in the world, whose combined wealth amounted to US$2.2 trillion. The richest 200 of these men have a combined income greater than 41 per cent of the world's people. A few of these men live in Australia, and the effect of WorkChoices on them is easy to see and understand. They will get even richer, more quickly, and although no one denies this, very few people talk about it, and nor will I. Because this presentation is about working class men, the men that most of you here live with, and relate to as workmates, friends, grandfathers, fathers, sons and brothers. The working class, of which they are part, comprises those people who have no control over significant productive resources other than their ability to work for those who do. They sell this ability to others over a significant period of their lives and, when they are unable to sell it or have no more of it left to sell, they rely on benefits and pensions which come from the taxes paid by the working class as a whole, and on their deferred wages in the form of superannuation.

These working-class men, less like their fathers who worked more in factories and mines and on farms and wharves, are more likely to be working in an office, hospital, shop or school. But like their fathers, they begin full-time waged work as soon as they have to, or are qualified to, and they continue it without ceasing, barring sackings and sickness, until aged 60 or older. Once they have obtained a full-time job, they fall in

love, get married, have children and earn sufficient to maintain themselves and generally to meet the majority of the costs incurred by their family-households.

There are about 3 million men like this in Australia. A few of these men will be ok with WorkChoices, at least in the sense of their earning capacity. The working class winners will be those men who do not have to care for others; who work in rapidly expanding industries; have knowledge and skills in high demand and short supply; have huge amounts of self-confidence and the gift of the gab; get on well with their employer; and, if they're particularly smart, have a good union to negotiate their individual contract, and to back it up. But even these men will be paying a price. Before we go there, though, in order to understand what's in WorkChoices for the majority of ordinary blokes, we need to be clear what it is that they want out of life. Happily, a plethora of surveys and studies over a number of years have delivered some pretty incontrovertible evidence about this.

These men rank 'family' as their greatest source of happiness, followed quite closely by 'friends', way ahead of 'work' and 'money'. They place far greater importance on the family-household than on their paid work as a source of happiness and meaning. But they do appreciate very, very clearly that paid work and earning money is the pathway to family. They understand with absolute clarity that the sexual market place is just like the labour market – that in it, those worth more, do better. Marriage is certainly a central life goal for young men, home-life and companionship more fundamental to their aspirations than even sex. The desire for a 'good home' and 'the love of a good woman' sustains and creates their masculine identity. A male worker measures his own worth and that of his mates by the ability to provide for a family. Men who cannot or will not support their families are pitied or scorned by other men and they feel themselves to be failures. Home-ownership is a real sign of their achievement. But once they have these things, and usually in this order – full-time job, wife, mortgage, children – they whinge incessantly to each other about not having enough time to spend with their families, with the people they correctly understand to be so central to their own well-being. In a nutshell, the problem for them is that breadwinning gets in the way of partnering and fathering. And this tension will ratchet up substantially, for above all, what WorkChoices does is to remove workers' ability to restrict or limit the length of the working day, week, year or lifetime; to control how hours

in paid work are organised; and to establish regular and reliable patterns of work.

The Employment Contracts Act introduced in New Zealand in 1991 was followed by a rapid and sharp increase in the hours worked. Already Australians are among the world leaders (if that's the right word!) in terms of hours worked. While many governments, in many parts of the world, have taken steps to reduce hours of paid work, Australia is heading in the opposite direction. Already one in three male workers work 49 or more hours per week for their employer. It is sobering to think that in 1799 the hours of work for convict labour were set at 50 per week.

A good husband and father is, still, above all, a breadwinner. While the strength of this belief has diminished somewhat, it is still pretty profound in its effects. Like most strongly held beliefs, this one too is connected to reality. On average, men and women work about the same number of hours per week – about 50 hours – but the division of work is highly gendered. Men perform 65% of the paid work in Australia, and 65% of the unpaid work is performed by women. The 'family wage' enshrined in 1907 by Mr. Justice Higgins of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration was to meet 'the normal needs of the average employee, regarded as a human being living in a civilised community' and was to be enough to support a male worker, a mother and three children. Over the years, a number of institutional supports grew up around this notion; tax laws, social security payments, recreational facilities, health care, building codes, insurance and finance policies, retirement provisions, the accessibility of private and public services, and of course the operation of the labour market itself.

A man's wage is, of course, no longer a family wage. But neither the fact that the family-household can no longer adequately support itself in the longer term without the wages of women, nor the fact that working class women use up a far greater proportion of their lives in paid work than they spend in full-time mothering, has greatly eroded the breadwinner ethos. Twenty years ago, fathers were the sole providers in half of the families with children under 15; currently the figure is around one quarter. The male wage, then, is no longer a family wage for the vast majority of families. One of the ways that working class families resolve this, is for mothers to work part-time. In fact, this is the most common pattern. In one out of three families, mothers work part time. So we can say then, that six out of ten families with children under 15 are reliant wholly or partially on the male wage, in that the mother is not in full-

time employment. This, then, is what gives the breadwinner ethos its purchase. Most women need their men's wages for at least some part of their lives. Most men support their children and their children's mother as palpable proof of their manhood. When it arrives, now well into one's thirties, fatherhood affects men through their greater propensity to work longer hours. The period of family formation and the early years of fathering is the time of their most intense engagement in the labour market. Establishing a home, and a period of at least a couple of years out of the workforce for their partners, rockets up men's engagement in paid work.

For what may well turn out to have been a very brief moment in Australian history, there were the beginnings of a re-definition of manliness in terms of partnering and fathering rather than in terms of breadwinning. The importance of the ability to care rather than possessing the capacity to pay, looked like it might have a small chance, for while men express their love for their families through wage earning, they often complain about feeling trapped by it. A break, a chink, came with the arrival of paid paternity leave. There was to be some respite from the world of wage labour for fathers, a chance to disengage for a while from paid work without feeling guilty about it, or losing one's job and jeopardising the family, and an opportunity to experience, even briefly, real, hands-on, full-time fathering. In those countries which have and will continue to have *paid* parental leave for men, fathers took a long time to adjust to the idea, but its use is now gradually taking off in those countries where it has been in existence for more than a decade, and its uptake is growing slowly and steadily.

In Australia, however, this option will be closed off by WorkChoices. Instead, there will be the antithesis of good fathering – increasingly unstable, unsocial and longer working hours, the direct harbingers of family instability. The Catholic Bishop of Parramatta, Bishop Manning, was correct in telling the NSW Police Association recently that the new laws will increase stress, unhappiness and depression, and he advised the police officers that 'a just society cannot expect its police force to enforce laws that undermine human dignity'.

In 1909 Justice Higgins, the president of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, established penalty rates for hours of work in excess of normal hours and for hours worked outside the normal span of hours. He made it clear that they had a twofold purpose, firstly to deter employers from employing people at unsocial times (hence the name 'penalty' rate), and secondly to compensate those who worked the unsocial hours. Nights,

evenings, weekends were then, to some degree, protected by these penalties. But already by 2003, over half of the Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) had abolished penalty rates altogether. Two thirds of the 250 lodged in the first month since the new law was introduced, abolished them as well. Not surprisingly, only 3% of 14-17 year olds expressed support for WorkChoices in a recent Roy Morgan Poll. Barbara Pocock's work on what children want out of life, shows pretty clearly that what they want is more time with both their parents, and more time with their parents together, that is, more common family time. But it is not just evenings, nights and weekends, that are under threat. Forty percent of workers on AWAs before WorkChoices have no access to annual holidays. With 11 public holidays per year in the 1980s, Australia ranked 22nd out of 32 comparable nations. The eleven have now been reduced to ten, and the pressure is on to reduce them still further.

After two decades of gradually narrowing the gap between men and women's wages, things have now turned around. We already know that the gender wages gap is wider under AWAs than it is under collective agreements. On average, full-time adult male workers earn 15% more than women. For those covered by collective agreements, the gap is 10%, and for those on AWAs, the difference is 20%. For part-time workers, the gap is even bigger. This gap will open up if AWA's become more widespread. The effect of the widening of this gap on men, will be to further reinforce their centrality as breadwinners, and conversely to reconfirm women in the role of carers.

It is very clear that most workers, male and female, participate in the labour force not only as individuals but also as members their family-households. Working men and women strategise, plan and agonise over their labour force participation in accord with the needs and resources of their family-household. Decisions about who will do how many hours of work, when, and for how long are made in the light of relative earning capacities. Research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies has shown that two-thirds of parents in employment take more than nine days a year off their jobs to care for children and about one in six take time off to care for adult family members. Forty percent of workers already on AWAs have *no* access to paid sick leave. When it comes to deciding which parent will take unpaid leave to care for family members, the parent earning substantially less is clearly the prime candidate. Once again for men, the wage will become love's yardstick, and they will 'choose' to demonstrate their commitment as fathers by continuing to 'bring home the bacon'.

Working class families need: liveable wages; security of employment; predictability; regular, common family time; hours of work that are not excessive; and adequate leave to care for children and to cope with illness, birth and death. WorkChoices threatens all of these. We now know a little more about workplace militancy than we used to. Unlike rioting, of which there have been four or five serious incidents around the country in the last twelve months, it is generally not the preserve of younger men. Industrial militancy starts to make sense to those men who realise that others are depending upon them and will do so for many years. There are times in one's life when being a man means standing up for what's right, alongside and in defence of those you love. As one of the men I have been talking about, I am proud to tell you that I intend to do exactly that, and that I will be far from alone.