



# ACCI WORKPLACE POLICY DIRECTOR DAVID GREGORY ON ABC RADIO'S "PM" PROGRAM - 18 DECEMBER 2009 - INDUSTRIAL ACTION

## Increased Industrial Action

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**MARK COLVIN:** The Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott, has invoked the ghost of Christmas past in an attack on the Federal Government over industrial relations. Mr Abbott says the Christmas strike of 30 years ago has returned with a "vengeance" because of the Government's changes to workplace laws.

In Sydney this morning hundreds of thousands of commuters not only battled bad weather but also a bus strike. Australia Post and Qantas have also been involved in pre-Christmas industrial action.

But the union movement says Mr Abbott is talking "rubbish" and beating up the significance of a few disputes.

From Canberra Samantha Hawley reports.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** A week out from Christmas, the festive spirit was dampened in Sydney this morning when thousands of bus drivers went on strike over a pay dispute.

**FEMALE COMMUTER:** They have no notice.

**MALE COMMUTER:** I just have to walk to work.

**FEMALE COMMUTER 2:** I just got a ferry and two trains.

**MALE COMMUTER 2:** I'll be late for work and have to make up the time later I suppose.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** Four thousand bus drivers in Sydney and Newcastle left an estimated 600,000 commuters battling the rain as they sought alternative ways to get to work.

**TONY ABBOTT:** Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard have given the green light to union militancy.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** It's not just the bus strike that's led to the Federal Opposition Leader's outburst. Postal workers led the pre-Christmas strike action, rail employees in Queensland walked off the job this week and almost 200 Qantas engineers are refusing to conduct maintenance on planes. It's all strike action in critical service sectors.

**TONY ABBOTT:** The return of the Christmas strike. We all thought that Christmas strikes were a thing of the past, now they're back with a vengeance.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** Tony Abbott says the Government's workplace relations laws are to blame. He says in two years since Labor took office there have been a million working days lost to strike action, a 150 per cent increase.

But the acting Prime Minister, Julia Gillard says Mr Abbott's analysis is wrong.

**JULIA GILLARD:** The first quarter of my system, the system started on the 1st of July, so the first quarterly data we got industrial action actually went down compared with the three months before.

We are seeing some disputes now yes that's true. Part of that is because we had a rush before WorkChoices was introduced where people rushed to get in to try and avoid the WorkChoices system, so we've got a lot of agreements that are coming up now for re-bargaining.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** Jeff Lawrence is from the Australian Council of Trade Unions.

**JEFF LAWRENCE:** There are a few disputes and each of them have got their own circumstances. But to say that this is of any significance is really a complete beat up.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** So it's just a coincidence that this is happening a week before Christmas?

**JEFF LAWRENCE:** Well it's a coincidence of a number of disputes which have got their individual circumstances.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** Tony Abbott says it is the return of the Christmas strike and that's because the Government changed workplace laws.

**JEFF LAWRENCE:** That's rubbish and he knows that it's rubbish. He was actually an industrial relations minister. He knows that bargaining takes place at different times in various industries.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's David Gregory says there are a number of reasons for the pre-Christmas strike action.

**DAVID GREGORY:** There are a number of agreements that are expiring at this time so there are negotiations naturally happening regarding the renewal of those agreements.

But I think also the sense during 2009, a difficult economic year, I think many employees, their principle concern was around job security rather than looking to improve existing terms and conditions of employment and I think with that sense now that the economy is starting to turn back up again.

The third factor is we obviously do now have a new framework of workplace laws in place, the Fair Work legislation that does provide some different opportunities for unions and employees.

**SAMANTHA HAWLEY:** But Tony Abbott insists there's only one reason and it's the softening of workplace laws under the Rudd Government.

**TONY ABBOTT:** We said that Mr Rudd and Ms Gillard were going to take workplace relations back to the 1970s; I never thought that it would mean the awful tradition of the Christmas strike but it seems that's exactly what it's meant.

And it really is a high time for Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard to get tough with these unions and to change the rules which are allowing these unions to flex their muscles in ways which hurt ordinary working Australians.

**MARK COLVIN:** The Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott ending Samantha Hawley's report.