



ABS FIGURES

Union numbers fall for those in full-time work

Dana McCauley

Union membership continues to fall among full-time employees, with new data showing the proportion that are union members has fallen from 18 per cent to 17 per cent in the two years to August.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics figures have been seized on by the business lobby as evidence that the union movement is no longer relevant to workers, despite its influence over the Labor Party.

Australian Mines and Metals Association chief executive Steve Knott said union membership had been on “a continuous downward slide” for decades, as increased job mobility left workers “less inclined to be aligned to union collectivism”.

“As the ACTU pitches for an IR nirvana based on living in the ’70s, it is unsurprising union membership continues to decline,” Mr Knott said.

Of the 6.7 million full-time workers in August 2018, 1.1 million reported they were union members – a drop of 320,000 since 2005.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive James Pearson said the ABS release exposed “false claims by big unions about how Australians work”.

“The data shows that wages are growing, with median weekly earnings up 4.6 per cent from last year – well in excess of inflation,” Mr Pearson said. “Casual employment has remained steady for more than two decades, at roughly 25 per cent of

employed Australians, while labour hire is stable and independent contracting has declined. It is time for the big unions to stop distorting facts to fuel their scare campaign and advance their self-interest.”

ACTU president Michele O’Neil said union membership had been stable for the past four years in the face of “relentless attacks” by the Coalition government.

Ms O’Neil pointed to the growth of the part-time and casual workforce, saying insecure work had made it “harder than ever for workers to organise and stand up for their rights”.

“Union members earn 15.4 per cent more than those not in unions in full-time jobs; this equates to \$200 per week extra for union members,” she said.

Across full-time and part-time employees, the ABS data revealed that the historical decline in union membership appeared to have levelled off at 15.5 per cent, with a drop of just 0.1 per cent in the past two years.

It comes after a 0.6 per cent fall in the previous two-year period.

Of the 9.9 million full and part-time employees who responded to the ABS survey’s questions on unionisation, 1.5 million reported being members. Public sector workers are the most highly unionised, with close to one-third of reporting they are union members.

Liberal senator and former industrial relations minister Eric Abetz said unions were “increasing their

influence” over Opposition Leader Bill Shorten – a former national secretary of the Australian Workers Union – and the Labor Party, even as their membership dwindled. Senator Abetz said workers were being turned off by the ACTU’s message that “breaking the law is okay” and that the union peak body wanted to take the industrial relations system “back to the 1950s”.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions is lobbying for dramatic changes to workplace laws, including giving unions the power to strike across industries by lifting the ban on pattern bargaining during protected industrial action.

Mr Shorten has agreed to consider the ACTU’s demands for industry-wide bargaining and promised to reverse penalty rate cuts if Labor wins government.

1.1 million

Union members from Australia’s 6.7 million full-time workers as of August 2018.