



Australia's Fair Work system

12. Union right of entry

The Government promised in *Forward with Fairness* that it would ensure right of entry laws would strike a balance between the right of employees to be represented by unions, and the right of employers to run their businesses without interference.

The Government also promised to maintain existing right of entry rules which ensure that only fit and proper persons are permitted to enter workplaces on behalf of unions, and that permit holders understand that their rights come with significant responsibilities.

The Government has kept these commitments. The right of entry provisions in the *Fair Work Act 2009* (the Fair Work Act) largely replicate the provisions in the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* (WR Act).

Some adjustments have been necessary as a consequence of the new modern award framework which has streamlined and simplified thousands of awards (see fact sheet 3, "A strong and simple safety net" for more information on modernised awards).

The key difference from the previous WR Act is that right of entry is now linked to the right of the union to represent the industrial interests of the relevant employees, rather than coverage by an instrument such as an award or enterprise agreement. Fair Work Australia can advise employers regarding the eligibility of a union to represent their employees.

Right of entry comes with strict obligations

Whether entering for discussion purposes or to investigate a possible breach of the Fair Work Act or a fair work instrument, unions must comply with strict conditions of entry:

- A union official must hold a valid right of entry permit, issued by Fair Work Australia. Permits can only be issued to a "fit and proper person".
- The permit holder must give at least 24 hours notice before entering and entry can only occur during working hours.
- The permit holder must set out the basis on which he or she has entry rights, including by referring to the relevant parts of the union's rules that gives the union the right to represent the employees.
- A permit holder must comply with any reasonable request from an employer that discussions or interviews take place in a particular part of the premises and that they take a particular route to reach that location. Similarly, he or she must comply with any reasonable occupational health or safety request.

Members (and potential members) of a union are able to meet with the union eligible to represent their interests at the workplace during meal times or other breaks for the purpose of holding discussions. In such discussions, employees and the union might canvass workplace issues as diverse as superannuation, workplace training and development, information on new laws, forthcoming bargaining, union services or health and safety issues.

There are strong penalties for anyone who misuses these entry rights or provides misleading information about their eligibility to enter a worksite. Fair Work Australia can resolve disputes about right of entry issues and will have the power to revoke or suspend the entry permits of officials who abuse their rights or who are no longer a fit and proper person to hold a permit.

Access to employee records only in specific circumstances and with strong penalties for misuse

Compliance with legal obligations is an important component of the Fair Work system. Unions have a very longstanding role in helping to ensure compliance with workplace laws. Unions can look at and copy the employment records of employees only where those records are relevant to the suspected breach of the law being investigated. This is the position that existed immediately before Work Choices and for many years before that.

Non-member records cannot be inspected or copied by a permit holder unless the non-member gives written consent or if Fair Work Australia agrees that access to the records is necessary to investigate the breach. Furthermore, an employer is not required to provide documents if doing so would otherwise breach a state or federal law.

There are strong protections against misuse of information obtained by a union in the course of investigating suspected breaches. In particular, a person cannot disclose information obtained under the right of entry for a purpose other than rectifying the alleged breach or in specific limited circumstances where there is a public interest in the information being disclosed (e.g. to report potential serious threat to public health or safety).

Controls on the use of information contained in the *Privacy Act 1988* also apply to any personal information collected during investigations. A fine of up to \$6,600 for individuals and \$33,000 for unions will apply where information is misused, and any permit holder found to have breached these provisions must have their permit revoked or suspended.

The Fair Work Act includes new right of entry provisions that apply specifically to outworkers in the Textile, Clothing and Footwear (TCF) industry. These new provisions are tailored to the unique nature of this industry. For example, under the provisions a permit holder can enter premises to inspect relevant documents even if the TCF outworkers do not work at the premises. In addition, advance notice of entry is not required when permit holders enter any premises to investigate suspected breaches relating to TCF outworkers.