

Discontent over union maternity leave plan

The Age DEBORAH GOUGH

June 1, 2008

WOMEN'S groups have criticised the union movement's push for 14 weeks' paid maternity leave — saying it is not enough time to ensure the health of mothers and babies.

The criticism comes as the Australian Council of Trade Unions prepares to submit its proposal to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into maternity leave on Wednesday.

The presiding commissioner, Robert Fitzgerald, has also questioned whether 14 weeks' paid leave is enough to benefit the health of mothers and babies.

Victorian Women's Trust executive director Mary Crooks said the Australian Council of Trade Unions was aiming too low in trying for consensus with business on paid maternity leave.

"I would have thought, that at the very least, the ACTU would know what an ambit claim should be," Ms Crooks told *The Sunday Age*.

The criticism comes as the ACTU forms an alliance with the Australian Industry Group on a taxpayer-funded paid maternity leave scheme that has also been backed by the Council of Small Business of Australia and the Australian Hotels Association.

The ACTU and business leaders have latched onto the International Labor Organisation recommendation of 14 weeks' paid maternity leave, set in 2000. But 14 weeks' leave is at odds with World Health Organisation guidelines from 2002 that mothers exclusively breastfeed babies until they are six months old.

The Australian Breastfeeding Association and the childbirth consumer body, the Maternity Coalition, also criticised the ACTU position, saying it offered the bare minimum to mothers and their babies. The breastfeeding association has called for a minimum leave of six months.

The association's national spokeswoman, Carey Wood, said a recent Melbourne University study found that babies exclusively breastfed to six months had a lower incidence of middle ear infections, respiratory illness, gastroenteritis and other conditions than children who were not.

"We need leadership on this and need to start looking at our health and what we want to achieve," Ms Wood said.

Ms Crooks presented the Victorian Women's Trust case last week to the Productivity Commission and called for a minimum of six months' leave for all.

She told the commission that six months was the minimum for a mother to bond with a baby, to breastfeed, recover from the birth (especially by caesarean section), for parents to renegotiate their relationship, for siblings to adjust and for visits from nurses.

ACTU president Sharan Burrow defended the truce with business over maternity leave. After 30 years of campaigning on the issue it was the "year for settlement", she said.

The ACTU's submission, due later this month, would call for mothers' rights to half-pay over six months. "If the Government can find it in itself to do more than 14 weeks — I'll be the first to pop the champagne," she said.

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