



## **JIM COMERFORD**

### **Adjournment Debate**

### **4 December 2006**

[Ms GRIERSON](#) (Newcastle) (10.39 p.m.)—I rise to pay tribute to the life of Jim Comerford, a man of extraordinary strength, passion and commitment to the principles of fairness and equity, and to honour the significance of his life's work to the character of Australia and the working lives of Australian men and women. Our nation lost a legendary figure with his death on 3 November, aged 93. A miner, a union leader, a proud socialist and a distinguished author of several volumes of mining history, Jim Comerford has left a remarkable legacy. I was honoured to join his family, friends and comrades in celebrating Jim's life at a memorial service last month. I again extend my deepest sympathy to Jim's lifelong and much loved partner, Mabel; his daughter, Jean, and son-in-law, Tony; his grandchildren, Bruce and Helen; and his great grandchildren, Matthew and Callen. The esteem in which Jim was held was reflected in the tributes he received from former Labor prime ministers Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and the former Labor leader Kim Beazley, who launched Jim's book *The Lockout* in April this year.

Jim Comerford was one of only three surviving Australians who were there at the lockout in 1929 when police opened fire on 4,000 miners at the Rothbury colliery in the Hunter Valley. One miner, Norman Brown, was shot dead. Another miner, Tom Flannery, collapsed and died when mounted police baton-charged the miners. Dozens more were severely wounded, carrying their scars and injuries for life. These men paid a too high price for daring to struggle for safe and fair work conditions. Jim was a 16-year-old pit boy when he witnessed these horrific events which shaped the rest of his life. Jim became an outstanding union leader and leader of the Retired Mineworkers Association. The Jim Comerford Miners Wall of Remembrance at Abermain is named in his honour.

My grandfather, a miner's federation man, was also part of the struggle at Rothbury, so I remain indebted to Jim Comerford for his insistence that the story of the lockout would never be forgotten. My stepfather feels honoured to have worked in the mines with him. For Jim Comerford, *The Lockout* is his generous gift to the nation. Importantly, Jim's telling of this epic story is a timely reminder of the legitimate role and work of trade unions in Australia and the benefits of collective bargaining for Australian workers. Jim actually

trained many of the union organisers in the labour movement who, with their colleagues, are today so steadfast in their opposition to this government's so-called Work Choices legislation.

Despite rhetoric about job creation and flexibility in the workplace, working families are already feeling the pressure of this extreme legislation. In June, I surveyed my electorate on what they thought of the government's industrial relations changes. Four hundred and seventy-nine Novocastrians responded, with 84 per cent of people expressing concern about the impact of the changes. For 19 per cent, the biggest concern was being sacked unfairly and 11.3 per cent selected being forced onto an AWA with less pay and fewer conditions. Losing penalty rates and overtime rated 10.6 per cent and young people being exploited rated 10½ per cent. Sixteen per cent of respondents indicated they were equally concerned about all aspects of the industrial relations changes. These figures reveal a new sense of insecurity and vulnerability among working people and the comments made by my constituents reveal that they have thought hard about Work Choices, with many having already been personally affected. A constituent from Merewether Heights wrote about the unfair dismissal laws:

*I am not against employers sacking if the employee doesn't work honestly [but] employers may take advantage of good workers unfairly.*

A Fletcher resident wrote about individual contracts:

*My workplace was bullied into signing part-time contracts. We lost a considerable amount of money per hour and gained nothing.*

On pay and conditions, a resident of Maryland said bluntly and regrettably:

*The moment WorkChoices came in I lost \$60 a week.*

The following quote reflects a widespread disquiet:

*We are concerned that our children and grandchildren will be forced to work under an Americanised system where people have to work two or three jobs just to make ends meet.*

The people of Newcastle are not whingers or bludgers. They have a reputation for hard work, toughness and resilience in the face of adversity, but they know that the Howard government has gone too far with these laws and they are increasingly expressing their anger. Like Jim Comerford and my grandfather before me, I will always dare to struggle for a safe and fair workplace. Newcastle's working men and women and future generations deserve no less. I will always dare to support the labour movement, for ordinary working Australians know that the difference between dignity and slavery is having a union that will defend your rights at work. I seek leave to table the *Newcastle workplace report*.