

A good start

The Federal Budget in May could include some welcome news on maternity leave.

Cyndi Tebbel reports.

Paid maternity leave will at long last become compulsory if the government follows through on the Productivity Commission's recommendations.

The union movement's decades-long campaign for paid maternity leave may finally become a reality. But this will only happen if the government stands by its election commitment and does not use the economic crisis as an excuse. Until then the union campaign will continue.

More than 50 per cent of women are denied access to paid maternity leave, making Australia one of only two OECD countries not to legislate this essential family-friendly policy.

At the end of February, the Rudd government received the final submission from the Productivity Commission, which it charged with assessing models for paid maternity, paternity and parental leave schemes. The ACTU, AEU and others contributed to the public submission process.

ACTU federal president Sharan Burrow believes the Productivity Commission's recommendations (see box) are a good start. "There are some who say 18 weeks is not good enough, but after 30 years of debate, it's a great first step to build on."

Fine-tuning will continue, with unions seeking additional benefits and safeguards including:

- A requirement that employers top up the government's paid leave so women earning above

minimum wage receive full income replacement.

- Flexibility on the qualifying period and how and when women can access the leave (before and after birth; 18 weeks at half pay over 36 weeks, etc).

The AEU reports that most teachers have access to 14 weeks paid maternity leave (although many casual and support staff don't get as much, if any), and it will continue to bargain for 26 weeks, along with other family-friendly measures.

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"We've agreed that whatever happens with the Productivity Commission or the National Employment Standards, the best way of delivering the conditions to our members is through collective bargaining, and we'll strive to bargain above what those standards are at the moment. Of course, we want them to be the best possible standards and as enforceable as possible."

"We're also clear that a national scheme shouldn't replace the current conditions we fought hard for. There should be no loss of entitlements with a new scheme," says Davis. •

Cyndi Tebbel is a freelance writer.

Your voice counts

Campaigning continues for a paid maternity leave scheme in the government's May budget. Make sure your voice is heard.

The ACTU's action plan is at <http://www.actu.asn.au/>. Click on 'Campaigns' and 'Current' and scroll down to paid maternity leave.

The AEU's submission on the NES is at www.aeufederal.org.au

The Productivity Commission has information on its submission at <http://www.pc.gov.au/>. Click on 'Projects', then 'Paid maternity, paternity and parental leave'.

The government's NES discussion paper is at www.workplace.gov.au

Other ways to get involved: call talkback radio; write a letter to the newspaper; and talk to your colleagues, friends and family.

Baby business

The Productivity Commission report's recommendations include:

- 18 weeks paid maternity leave funded primarily by the federal government at minimum wage rates (\$543.78 a week). This would be taxed.
- Employers to continue paying 9 per cent superannuation on the paid leave.
- Available to all mothers who have worked at least 10 hours a week on average over the previous 12 months with the same or various employers.
- 18 weeks to be taken after any other paid maternity leave the employer provides.
- 18 weeks must begin within six months of the baby's birth.
- 18 weeks not available before the birth.
- 18 weeks can't be taken at half pay.
- 18-week payment not available to 'stay-at-home' mothers who will continue to receive the baby bonus and Family Tax Benefit part B.
- Two weeks paid paternity leave.