

Unions will keep campaigning for amendments to China trade deal

Peta Donald reported this story on **Wednesday, October 14, 2015**

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: The Federal Government is now negotiating with the Opposition "in good faith" over the massive China Free Trade Agreement to pass legislation to implement it by the end of the year.

But not everyone in Labor and the union movement believes the Opposition has gone far enough in its attempts to protect Australian jobs and conditions.

The peak union body the ACTU is vowing to keep up its campaign for jobs to be offered locally before they go to Chinese workers.

And one Labor MP has told AM his party should be prepared to block the trade agreement if the Government does not agree to Labor's demands.

From Canberra, Peta Donald reports.

PETA DONALD: While the ACTU welcomes Labor's demands around the China Free Trade Agreement, it would have liked them to go further.

ACTU president, Ged Kearney:

GED KEARNEY: Labor's Migration Act amendments will address- will go some way to addressing our concerns around the big projects.

But we still have that provision where people can come under 457 visas and not be subject, outside IFAs (Investment Facilitation Arrangements) and not be subject to labour market testing.

PETA DONALD: What's an example of what you're talking about?

GED KEARNEY: Well, for example if I was a hospital and I wanted to recruit a nurse, I would normally under a 457 visa program have to show that there is a shortage in Australia - that I've advertised, that I've tested the market to make sure that I'm not bypassing nurses in my area or some nurses who want to work in that hospital.

Under the Chinese Free Trade Agreement my understanding is that they wouldn't have to test the local market first. So they could access a nurse from China without having to make sure that a local person got that job first.

PETA DONALD: What will the unions do now? Are you going to drop your campaign against the China Free Trade Agreement?

GED KEARNEY: We will continue to have a conversation with our members and the Australian people about our concerns that remain.

We have a series of town hall meetings set up that will go ahead regardless because we still want to be able to talk to the people.

We will say that the Labor Party have made these changes, that they have improved some of the aspects of the China Free Trade Agreement that we were worried about, but there are still things that we need to worry about.

PETA DONALD: Some within Labor still aren't comfortable either, but there's also acceptance the Opposition has demanded as much as it could without asking for the deal with China to be renegotiated.

KELVIN THOMSON: I welcome this as a step forward.

PETA DONALD: Labor backbencher Kelvin Thomson is Deputy Chair of the joint Parliamentary Committee that's been examining the China Free Trade Agreement.

KELVIN THOMSON: If the Government is not prepared to entertain these proposals then I don't think the treaty should be ratified because I think the dangers for Australian workers are too great.

PETA DONALD: So you think Labor should be prepared to block this free trade agreement if the Government doesn't agree to your safeguards?

KELVIN THOMSON: That's right. I think that it's essential that we have safeguards in place to make sure that there are provisions in this agreement that don't get abused.

PETA DONALD: There's pressure in the opposite direction too. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has called Labor's demands shamelessly opportunistic, arguing they'd be time consuming and costly for businesses.

The Australian Industry Group is also concerned about unnecessary red tape. The group's chief executive Innes Willox:

INNES WILLOX: We don't find labour market testing is necessary. It's costly. These are often in areas where businesses already know there are labour shortages - either because of the regional implications or the highly developed skills that are needed.

So these are not things that the businesses enter into lightly, but what we're saying here is that if the Government and the Opposition come to an agreement around labour market testing that that not be any more onerous than the current labour market testing provisions already are.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Innes Willox from the Australian Industry Group speaking to Peta Donald.