

## **Song sung blue - everybody's learning one**

April 15, 2006

As a musician and a freelance writer, I have been a union member for most of my 30-plus working years (the Musicians Union and now the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance).

I first joined in the 1970s because an unscrupulous club owner refused to pay me and my band for services rendered. We were then paid, as we were in future. My motivation for joining was propelled by the hip-pocket factor, but realising how exploited other musicians were, I stood for election to the Musicians Union executive - a lone woman at the time. We fought for better working conditions and I saw how much unions protected those who cannot protect themselves.

But the cold, hard facts are that there is no protection today, either within or out of a union and no matter what your profession. This was evident from Jason Helton's letter "All work, no penalties" (April 13). This young man probably took penalty rates and overtime for granted until these rights were snatched away by John Howard's industrial relations laws. And why should he not expect that? These were rights Jason expected as part of the deal, and because of his youth may not have been aware these rights were fought for over many decades; the minimum wage, the working week, safe workplaces, holiday and sick pay.

But Jason knows now, and so do many of his contemporaries as new cases confirm, that it has become a tough world out there and we have absolutely no voice in the workplace.

The future lies in the hands of youth and I hope as they become older and exercise the right to vote, they, too, have long memories and recall the impotent rage they felt when their rights and take-home pay were eroded overnight.

John Howard was smart enough to know this is a country that votes with its hip pocket, but those hip pockets are becoming leaner and leaner. It's not just the youth who are feeling the pinch. I suspect there will be a lot of people who will think carefully before casting their vote at the next federal ballot box; a few extra paltry dollars in tax cuts won't be the major influence.

For all its faults - and there are many - at least the Labor Party protects the rights of the workers.

**Jenny Sheard** Glebe