



14 APR, 2022

Union deal a step too far for builders

The Australian, Australia

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Election²²

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Master Builders Australia is seeking an assurance from Anthony Albanese not to revive a 2020 “secret” deal negotiated between the Business Council of Australia and the ACTU it says would fast-track the approval of union enterprise agreements.

MBA chief executive Denita Wawn told The Australian she was concerned at comments made by the Opposition Leader on Sky News on day one of the election campaign in which he argued the deal would have boosted productivity and lifted wages growth.

Mr Albanese said that, if he was elected, he would host a “full employment summit” and bring business and unions together.

“What we saw was the Business Council and the ACTU get very close to an agreement that would boost productivity,” Mr Albanese said.

“The way that you lift wages and lift profits can only be through productivity, that’s how you can get a win-win.”

Ms Wawn was a key figure who helped kill off the deal in 2020, arguing it had been sprung on employers during the industrial relations working group meetings convened during the height of the pandemic.

The working groups were part of the Coalition’s push to strike a new consensus on the industrial relations framework, with the BCA and ACTU having thrashed out a joint proposal to rewrite enterprise bargaining rules.

But Ms Wawn says the deal would have returned the IR

system to the 1950s by handing preferential treatment to union agreements over non-union agreements and undermined freedom of association.

Speaking to The Australian on Wednesday, Ms Wawn said: “We were concerned from some comments by both Labor deputy leader Richard Marles and the Leader of the Opposition on Sky News that they were keen to implement the discussions and proposal by the ACTU and the BCA from the IR working groups from 2020.”

Ms Wawn said she opposed the deal “on the basis that the BCA and ACTU proposal was to have a two-streamed EBA process ... whereby the union agreements would have an easier test to meet and a faster process”.

“They would be effectively sped through the commission,” she said. “Our argument was that having a two-tiered system would be a breach of the freedom of association laws.”

Australian Mines and Metals Association chief executive Steve Knott said four of the five business groups in the working group discussions “wanted all enterprise agreements approved, so far as practical, by the Fair Work Commission within 21 days”.

“Creating a new fast-tracked union preference stream was a preposterous idea in breach of freedom-of-association principles and anti-discrimination law,” Mr Knott said. “It would only coerce employers and employees into involving unions in enterprise agreement negotiations ... to no discernible gain aside from increasing union membership and ALP donations.”