

ΑΡΘΡΟ ΤΗΣ ΣΟΦΙΑΣ ΚΩΤΣΗ  
ΣΤΗ SUN HERALD,  
ΤΗΝ ΚΥΡΙΑΚΗ 6 ΜΑΪΟΥ 2012

## Weekend workers deserve more



**S**ydney Airport is a different world at 4.30am. Darting across a nearly deserted car park to the terminal in a biting wind is a feeling I haven't forgotten more than 15 years later. This is how many of my work days began as a short-order cook.

I remember the smell of jet fuel in the air and the familiar whirr of the cleaning machines in the empty airport terminal. Take the thousands of travellers out of Kingsford Smith Airport and it seems a much bigger, much lonelier place.

For four years, I worked every weekend at the airport. I spent Easter and Christmas Day making bacon-and-egg rolls for hungry travellers instead of spending time with my family.

That's the sacrifice I made to earn penalty rates. And that's what hospitality workers and young people continue to do today.

I've still got my shift work diary from 1995. Like all shift workers, this diary ran my life. On a typical Saturday, work began at 4.30am and lasted until 9.30am, followed by an unpaid break for 7<sup>1/2</sup> hours. I then came back to work from 5pm until 10.30pm. In those days, it took an hour-and-a-half on the bus to get from Mascot to my parents' home in Hurstville. Sometimes, I would drive my dad's old station wagon home in my break if I was lucky. Usually, I would find a quiet corner in the airport (a tough ask even in those days) and pull out my library books to study. Come Sunday, I would be back again for another 4.30am shift, followed by another unpaid break before I started again at 2.30pm to work until 7pm.

My situation would be familiar to many young people

working in hospitality. I was trying to cram as much into life as I possibly could. Work, study, sport, going out with my friends and spending time with my family. Many of the other women I worked with already had children of their own. I saw how difficult it was for them to miss out on watching their kids play weekend sport, go to birthday parties and do all the things other parents take for granted on the weekend.

These women were struggling to provide for their families and to pay off their mortgages. Weekend penalty rates made that time away from their families all the more bearable.

In Australia, when we extend ourselves beyond the normal working week, we are compensated. When we work night shifts and on weekends, we are missing out on precious time everyone else enjoys to do the things that make life so special – time with our families and friends.

When I think back to my first catering job 20 years ago, I know I would never have put in those hours without the incentive of penalty rates. I also know that I would never have been able to buy my first car – a battered Suzuki Sierra – finish my studies and support my parents during a difficult time when my dad had two major heart bypass operations and had to take lengthy periods off-work.

Last week Restaurant & Catering Australia and the NSW Business Chamber applied to Fair Work Australia to abolish weekend penalty rates for workers in bars, cafes, restaurants and hospitality workplaces. These employer groups argued "there is no meaningful distinction between working

on weekdays or weekends". Weekends have always been sacred in Australia.

One of Lachlan Macquarie's first orders when he became governor of NSW was that the colony's convict labourers should not work on Sundays. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Australian labour movement fought for a five day working week and extra pay for people who worked on weekends. Weekends are a time for families to come together and for friends to catch up. Weekends are when we play and watch sport. Churches hold their main religious services on Sunday.

Once the principle is established that weekends are no different from weekdays, workers right across the country stand to lose their penalty rates.

This isn't what I want for my children and their generation when they start out in their first jobs. If they are going to give up their weekends, they should be fairly compensated, just as I was and many other Australians. We cannot become a country that treats weekends like every other day of the week. Shift and hospitality workers are sacrificing the time that the rest of us spend relaxing. They do it because they have to and some of them will keep on doing it even without penalty rates simply because they have no other option.

A race to the bottom on penalty rates is not the solution. We should be fighting to protect for our children the workplace rights that past generations have enjoyed.

**Sophie Cotsis, MLC, is the NSW opposition spokeswoman on industrial relations.**

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