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Retail Workers Need Genuine Choice and Equitable Pay

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Retail workers in Australia are demanding fair wages and true workplace flexibility as economic pressures mount, with stagnant pay and rigid conditions fueling discontent. The sector's struggles highlight the need for market-driven reforms to empower workers, amid criticism of government policies that fail to address their economic realities.

Australia's retail industry, employing over 1.3 million workers, is a cornerstone of the economy, yet many earn just above the minimum wage of \$24.10 per hour as of July 2025 (Fair Work Commission, 2025). The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA) reports that 60% of retail workers feel underpaid, with part-time and casual staff often locked into unpredictable schedules (SDA, 2025). Retail worker Sarah Thompson told *The Australian*, "We need wages that reflect living costs and rosters we

can actually plan our lives around” (The Australian, 2025). Stagnant wages, coupled with rising inflation, have eroded purchasing power, pushing workers to seek better opportunities elsewhere, exacerbating staff shortages.

The opposition argues that the Labor government’s workplace regulations stifle flexibility, trapping retailers and employees in outdated agreements. Shadow Employment Minister Michaelia Cash criticized the government’s approach, stating, “Bureaucratic red tape prevents businesses from offering tailored conditions that suit workers” (Sky News, 2025). For instance, enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) often limit penalty rate adjustments, reducing incentives for weekend work while failing to lift base pay. A free-market approach, like simplifying EBAs or offering tax incentives for retailers who boost wages, could drive competition and improve earnings, benefiting both workers and businesses.

Retail’s economic contribution—\$420 billion annually—relies on a motivated workforce, yet high turnover costs businesses \$7 billion yearly in recruitment and training (Australian Retailers Association, 2024). Flexible scheduling and performance-based pay could reduce churn, but regulatory hurdles discourage innovation. The opposition pushes for deregulation to allow retailers to negotiate directly with employees, fostering choice and fairness. As consumer demand grows, ensuring retail workers have equitable pay and genuine flexibility is critical to sustaining the sector’s economic vitality and supporting Australia’s broader prosperity.