

General Protections Dispute - Non-Termination

JobWatch
Employment Rights Legal Centre

This Fact Sheet is designed for eligible workers (including independent contractors and job applicants) who have been subjected to unlawful adverse action but, if employed as an employee, have not been dismissed.

If you were an employee and you have been dismissed, you only have **21 days** from the date your dismissal took effect to file a General Protections Dispute - Termination claim or, if eligible, an unfair dismissal claim at the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

Whether or not you are an employee or independent contractor can sometimes be a difficult question to answer. If you are unsure whether you are an independent contractor or an employee, please seek further assistance from JobWatch, your union or a lawyer.

What action can I take?

The General Protections in the *Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)* (the Act) make certain actions by an employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) in an independent contracting relationship specifically unlawful.

If you have been subjected to unlawful adverse action (excluding dismissal) by your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) (i.e. where you are an independent contractor or employee of an independent contractor), you may be able to file a General Protections Dispute - Non-Termination claim (GPD-NT) at a federal court.

You have **6 years** from the date the unlawful adverse action took place (excluding dismissal) to file a claim. Alternatively, a voluntary conference can be held at the FWC before filing a claim at a federal court if both parties agree to attend.

What are my rights?

Your employer or prospective employer (e.g. when you have applied for a job) must not take unlawful adverse action against you because or partly because of one or more of the following prohibited reasons:

- your race, colour, sex, sexual preference, gender identity, intersex status, age, physical or mental disability, marital status, family or carer's responsibilities, pregnancy, breastfeeding, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin;
- you have a workplace right;
- you have exercised or not exercised a workplace right;
- you propose to or propose not to exercise a workplace right;
- to prevent you from exercising a workplace right;
- trade union membership or non-membership; or
- you engaged in industrial activity.

See JobWatch's 'Unfair Dismissal', 'General Protections Dispute - Termination claim' and 'Independent Contracting Traps' Fact Sheets for more information.

Disclaimer

This Fact Sheet contains information of a general nature only and is not a substitute for professional legal advice. You should obtain legal advice from a lawyer about your particular situation before acting on any of the following information. This Fact Sheet is designed for employees and prospective employees in Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland only. If you are not from these states, you should obtain advice about your specific case as soon as possible.

What is adverse action?

Employer–Employee

If you are an employee, your employer takes unlawful adverse action against you if, because or partly because of a prohibited reason, they:

- injure you in your employment (e.g. denies you a promotion because you are pregnant); or
- alter your position to your detriment (e.g. they change the shift roster resulting in you having fewer shifts, or they change your job to one of lower pay and/or status, because you complained to them about being bullied); or
- discriminate between you and other employees of the employer (e.g. because you exercised your workplace right to take paid sick leave you were denied a bonus that was given to other comparable employees).

Prospective Employer–Prospective Employee

If you are a prospective employee, e.g. you have applied for a job, a prospective employer takes unlawful adverse action against you if, because or partly because of a prohibited reason, they:

- refuse to employ you; or
- discriminate against you in the terms or conditions on which they offer to employ you (e.g. by offering you less pay compared to other comparable employees because you are a woman).

Principal (Boss)–Independent Contractor

If you are an independent contractor, a principal (boss) who has entered into a contract for services with you may have taken unlawful adverse action against you (or a person employed or engaged by you) if they:

- terminate the contract; or
- injure you in relation to the terms and conditions of the contract; or
- alter your position to your prejudice; or
- refuse or agree to make use of, services offered by you; or
- refuse to supply, or agree to supply, goods or services to you.

Prospective Principal (Boss)–Independent Contractor

If you are an independent contractor, a principal (boss) who proposes to enter into a contract for services with you may have taken unlawful adverse action against you (or a person employed or engaged by you) if they:

- refuse to engage you; or
- discriminate against you in the terms or conditions on which they offer to engage the independent contractor; or
- refuse or agree to make use of services offered by you; or
- refuse to supply, or agree to supply, goods or services to you.

Do I have grounds to make a claim?

Discrimination

It is against the law for your employer (or prospective employer) to take adverse action against you because of your race, colour, sex, sexual preference, gender identity, intersex status, age, physical or mental disability, marital status, family or carer's responsibilities, pregnancy, breastfeeding, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin.

Note: Adverse action may look different depending on your status as an employee or an independent contractor, and your relationship with your employer, prospective employer, principal (boss) or prospective principal (boss).

Note: If you are an independent contractor (or employee of an independent contractor), the circumstances in which you can make a General Protections claim against a principal (boss) are quite limited compared to employees' potential claims against employers because not all 'prohibited reasons' apply.

See JobWatch's discrimination Fact Sheets for more information.

Discrimination (cont.)

It is a defence if your employer (or prospective employer) can show that the reason for taking adverse action against you is:

- not unlawful under any state or federal anti-discrimination law; or
- taken because of the inherent requirements of your job; or
- taken by a religious institution in accordance with the doctrines of the religion.

Workplace rights

Workplace rights can be broadly described as your employment rights and entitlements and your ability to exercise and enforce those rights and entitlements. Some aspects of this part may also protect independent contractors (or persons employed or engaged by independent contractors) as well as employees.

It is unlawful for your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) to take unlawful adverse action against you because:

- you have a workplace right;
- you have or have not exercised a workplace right;
- you propose or propose not to exercise a workplace right; or
- to prevent you from exercising a workplace right.

You have a 'workplace right' if:

- you are entitled to the benefit of a workplace law, workplace instrument or order made by an industrial body (e.g. you have rights under an Award, Enterprise Agreement or the Act);
- you are able to initiate, or participate in a process or proceedings under a workplace law or workplace instrument such as a conference held by the FWC or court proceeding under a workplace law;
- you are able to make a complaint or inquiry to an external body which has powers to seek compliance with that workplace law (e.g. the FWC, Fair Work Ombudsman, etc); or
- you are able to make a complaint or inquiry in relation to your employment (but not if you are an independent contractor).

Industrial activities

It is against the law for your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) to take adverse action against you because:

- you are or were a union member or officer;
- you engaged or proposed to engage in 'industrial activity'; or
- you did not engage or proposed not to engage in 'industrial activity'.

Multiple reasons for action and reverse onus of proof

You should note that if you believe that your employer has taken adverse action *because of* one or more of the protected reasons and you state that in your claim:

- it is presumed that the reason for the adverse action has been done for an unlawful reason unless your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) can prove otherwise (known as reverse onus of proof); and
- it is still unlawful even if only part of the reason for the adverse action was unlawful. However, the unlawful reason must have been a substantial and operative reason for the adverse action.

Note: This part of the General Protections does not apply to independent contractors.

Example:

Jane is employed by a labour hire agency and is placed at a host business where she works as a process worker. Jane complains to her host about work health and safety issues and, because she complained, is told by the agency that the host does not want her to come back.

Jane may be able to make a GPD-NT claim against the host business.

'Industrial activity' includes if you:

- join or not join a union;
- pay union fees;
- ask to be represented by a union; and
- take part in industrial action.

What other rights do I have?

Misrepresenting employment as independent contracting arrangement

It is unlawful for an employer that employs, or proposes to employ, a person, to tell that person that they would be taken on as an independent contractor when they are actually an employee.

Dismissing to engage as independent contractor

It is unlawful for an employer to dismiss, or threaten to dismiss, an employee so that they can re-engage the same person as an independent contractor performing the same work.

Misrepresentation to engage as independent contractor

It is unlawful for an employer that employs, or has at any time employed, a person to perform particular work to make a false statement to persuade or influence the person to become an independent contractor doing the same work.

How do I make a claim?

Voluntary conference at the FWC

A voluntary conference at the FWC can be held to attempt to resolve the matter if both parties (e.g. you and your employer) agree to attend.

To apply for a conference, you have to fill out an application form (Form F8C – General Protections Application Not Involving Dismissal), which is available from the FWC. You can file the application form with the FWC online, by post or fax, email or phone, or by personally delivering it to the FWC. A small filing fee is required to be paid with your claim.

The conference generally takes place within a few weeks of the application being filed, provided your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) agrees to attend, as the conference is voluntary.

If a settlement is not reached at the conference, you may proceed with your claim at a federal court if you are still within the **6 year** time limit. If you decide to proceed to court, you should obtain legal advice before filing a claim.

What happens at a conference?

The purpose of the conference is to bring you and your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) together to try and resolve the matter without going to a formal hearing in court.

The conference is facilitated by a FWC conciliator. The FWC conciliator does not make a decision about who is right and wrong. Their role is to assist the parties to come to an agreement to settle the claim.

You can agree to settle your claim at any time, even before the conference. If you receive an offer of settlement, you should obtain independent legal advice so that you are satisfied that the offer is reasonable given the merits of your case.

Fair Work Commission

P: 1300 799 675

W: fwc.gov.au

Note: The filing fee may be waived by the FWC if you can show that it would cause you "serious hardship". To be eligible, you must file a fee waiver application form at the same time as (or soon after) you file your General Protections Dispute claim.

Note: Interpreters may be provided free of charge in some circumstances. Contact the FWC for more information.

Do I need a lawyer or paid agent?

You are *not* obliged to retain a lawyer or paid agent. If you wish, you can retain a lawyer or paid agent and seek the permission of the FWC to be represented by that lawyer or paid agent. Before you retain a lawyer or paid agent you should consider:

- how much their fees will be;
- when they need to be paid; and
- to what stage are they prepared to take your claim.

Generally, you will have to pay your own legal costs regardless of the result of your case. Some employment law firms and advocates offer a “no-win-no-fee” arrangement which often means you don’t have to pay all of their fee if you are not successful with your claim.

Representing yourself?

It is important to be prepared for the conference. The FWC conciliator will ask you to outline your claim briefly and state what remedy you are seeking. Write down a brief chronology of the relevant events and summarise the key details of your employment.

You should explain why you think the adverse action you have suffered is unlawful ‘adverse action’, taking into account the grounds of your claim. Your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) will also be given an opportunity to put forward their side of the case. Discussion will then normally occur with a view to reaching a settlement if possible.

If a settlement is reached

If you have settled your claim, you may be asked to sign a document called a ‘Release Agreement’, ‘Settlement Agreement’, ‘Deed of Release’, ‘Terms of Settlement’ or something similar. These are legal documents that usually state that:

- you and your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) have agreed to settle your claim; and
- in return for compensation, you will not take any further action against your employer, prospective employer or principal (boss) in the future over any and all matters arising out of or related to circumstances of your claim.

Discontinuing your matter

You should file a ‘Notice of Discontinuance’ form (Form 50) with the FWC once:

- you have settled for an amount of compensation and/or reinstatement; and
- you have received the settlement monies; and
- the funds have been cleared.

What if a settlement cannot be reached at a conference?

If a settlement is not reached at a conference, your options are:

- to discontinue your application by filing a ‘Notice of Discontinuance’ form (Form 50) with the FWC; or
- to proceed to have your claim heard at a federal court.

Note: Law firms participating in the Legal Referral Service run by the Law Institute of Victoria will provide you with an initial consultation of up to 30 minutes free of charge.

Note: Releases often have complicated legal language in them and can be difficult to understand. If you have any doubts about signing one of these documents or if you think you may have other claims against your employer, prospective employer or principal, you should obtain legal advice before you sign.

Note: You must give a copy of this form to the respondent, e.g. your former employer, as soon as reasonably practicable after it is lodged with the FWC.

Court claim

You can file a claim at either the Federal Court or Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia within **6 years** of the unlawful (Non-Termination) adverse action occurring. A small fee will be payable upon filing or you can apply for a fee waiver due to financial hardship.

You should also consider whether your claim is just against your employer/prospective employer/principal (boss) or whether other people involved should also be added as accessories, e.g. the person that made the decision to take adverse action.

For this and other reasons, you should obtain legal advice before filing your claim at court. For further assistance, contact JobWatch, your union, or a lawyer.

Court hearing

Representing yourself at a federal court is much more complicated than representing yourself at a FWC conference because you will have to comply with strict rules of evidence and procedure. It is recommended that you engage a lawyer to represent you at a federal court or at least obtain legal advice before trying to represent yourself. For further assistance, contact JobWatch, your union or a lawyer.

In terms of remedies, the Federal Court and the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia have powers to make any order deemed fit which usually includes financial compensation.

Costs

Generally, each party pays its own legal costs. However in some circumstances, the FWC or a federal court may make an 'order for costs' against one of the parties. This can only happen in limited circumstances including if they are satisfied that one of the parties:

- made the claim vexatiously or without reasonable cause; or
- a party's unreasonable act or omission caused the other party to incur the costs.

Fair Work Ombudsman Claim

In addition to filing your claim at the FWC for a voluntary conciliation conference, you can also make a request for assistance with the Fair Work Ombudsman. The Fair Work Ombudsman has discretion to investigate your complaint and take your matter to court.

Federal Court

W: fedcourt.gov.au

Federal Circuit and Family Court

W: federalcircuitcourt.gov.au

Note: The relevant forms for a claim in the FCFCA are 'Form 4 – Claim under the Fair Work Act 2009 alleging contravention of a general protection' which must also be accompanied by the Fair Work Division Application Form.

Note: A claim to the federal courts must be made within 6 years of the unlawful (non-termination) adverse action occurring.

Note: If you are in doubt about the strength of your claim, you should obtain independent legal advice before or shortly after filing your claim. As an applicant, you run the risk of incurring a liability for costs from the moment you make your claim.

Where to get help

JobWatch's free and confidential Telephone Information Service

P: (03) 9662 1933 (Melb Metro), 1800 331 617 (Regional Vic, Qld, Tas)

W: jobwatch.org.au

Fair Work Infoline (Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman)	13 13 94
Fair Work Commission	1300 799 675
Australian Human Rights Commission	1300 656 419
Community Legal Centres Australia	02 9264 9595
ACTU Worker Information line (for referral to a union)	1300 362 223
Law Institute of Victoria's Legal Referral Service	03 9607 9311
Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC)	1300 292 153
Queensland Law Society (for referral to a lawyer)	1300 367 757
Queensland Human Rights Commission	1300 130 670
Law Society of Tasmania (for referral to a lawyer)	03 6234 4133
Equal Opportunity Tasmania	1300 130 670

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JobWatch acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are located and where we conduct our business. We pay our respects to ancestors, and Elders, past, present and emerging.