

THE WORKPLACE

What's happening with our labour and our rights at work?

People wake up every day and go to their jobs, paid and unpaid, and make Australia happen – providing a relatively good life to most people.

But in the media there is a constant drumbeat of criticism of workers, and their trade unions – note the Royal Commission into Trade Union Corruption and Governance. There is a sustained pressure to reduce wages and increase taxes on workers – note the Productivity Commission attack on penalty rates. There is a campaign to criminalise trade union activity for collective bargaining and for asserting members' concerns on health and safety, social and economic policy, war and peace. This is the push for more inequality, less democracy.

At the start of 2017, there were 12 million people in the paid labour force in Australia, of whom 6.4 million are men, and 5.6 million are women, and a further 374,000 men and 346,000 women are unemployed.

Workers created trade unions long ago to genuinely represent their interests. But to do this, unions have to be democratic, and independent of employer interests. Union funds should only be used to advance the interests of the members as decided democratically by members.

Social impact of our labour

Workplace health & safety is fundamental and a primary focus for democratic decision-making by workers about taking care of each other. This opens up the question of the impact of work more broadly in the community and the environment. The famous Green Bans by the NSW Builders Labourers in the 1970s are a high point for Australian workers asserting control over the social and environmental impact of their work.

Collective bargaining

Wages are also fundamental, and wage levels and relativities are a major focus of conflict between employers and employees. Job security, hours of work, leave arrangements, training, and consultation on change are all important elements of the collective bargaining process.

Collective Bargaining gets the best results. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the pay for 41.8% of adult full-time non-managerial employees is set by Col-



lective Agreements. These employees have the highest average hourly total cash earnings and are paid for the most total hours per week. This compares to 44.5% of adult workers paid by individual arrangements, and 12.7% of adult workers relying on the Award only.

But Collective Bargaining is only possible through trade union organisation, and at the start of 2015, trade union membership in Australia was just 15 per cent of the workforce – 39 per cent in the public sector, and 11 per cent in the private sector. This is the lowest level of union density since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Working time

Even though the 35-hour week was won in several industries in the 1970s, and the 38-hour week became standard in 1981 as a result of the 35-hour week campaign, most full-time workers are working longer hours, and many much longer. At the same time many part-time workers desperately need more paid hours. Employers are demanding more and more 'flexibility' at the expense of employees.

Illegal workplace practices

During 2015, the widespread use of illegal labour practices was uncovered in the 7-Eleven shop franchise, but also in other franchises, petrol station chains, in orchards and vegetable farms. Over 1 million people on vulnerable 457, working holiday or student visas were working for as little as \$6 per hour, and well below the minimum wage of \$17.70 per hour for a standard 38-hour week. That is about 10 per cent of the entire workforce.

This is powerful evidence of a massive collapse of legal industrial standards, driven by employer policy and assisted by widespread ignorance of basic worker rights, and fear of the boss. There is a widespread culture of not making Workers Compensation claims if injured at work, for fear of being accused of 'disloyalty'.

Working for nothing!

Australia's apprenticeship schemes assist young workers into the blue collar labour market, but the white collar and professional labour markets lack similar regulation. Unpaid internships and the expectation that graduate-level employees will have performed significant amounts of this unpaid work are widespread. Naturally, people from low income families are less likely to be able to perform unpaid work. Such expectations 'price out' low income families' access to white collar and professional labour markets, increasing social inequality and decreasing social mobility.

Unpaid work time is illegal except if it is part of a vocational training program and does not involve normal work tasks, or a short fully-supervised skills test, or if the workers is a volunteer in a non-for-profit enterprise.

Questions for discussion:

- 1. How do you see the connection between a 'fair society' and the workplace?**
- 2. How does the workplace contribute to the widening gap between rich and poor?**

- 3. What is your experience of trade unions? How could trade unions reverse the trend to falling union density?**
- 4. How can workers and their unions get a stronger voice on the broader social and environmental impact of their work?**
- 5. Is it time to demand a 30-hour standard working week with no loss of pay?**
- 6. What is the best way to address the gross exploitation of Visa 457, Working Holiday visa holders and Student Visa holders in the workforce?**
- 7. How can the growing use of unpaid labour in the guise of 'internships' and 'work experience' be stopped?**
- 8. What role could Australian workers and their trade unions play in fostering more equality in economic development worldwide?**

**Send your group or individual ideas and feedback to
contact@commonaction.org.au**

Common Action network: Aboriginal Rights Coalition, Australian Fair Trade & Investment Network, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Community & Public Sector Union - PSU Group, Construction Forestry Mining & Energy Union, Evatt Foundation, Federation of Italian Migrant Workers & Families, f-collective, Greens NSW, Maritime Union of Australia Sydney Branch, Migrant Australia, National Tertiary Education Union, NSW Nurses & Midwives Association, NSW ALP Socialist Left, SEARCH Foundation. <http://www.commonaction.org.au>. February 2017.