

A Fair Society

Social Inclusion and Workforce Participation Policy

Introduction

1. Unions believe in the right of all citizens to employment, a decent living standard, and the protection of the social security safety net. Government has a role in ensuring fairness, equality, and opportunity throughout the community.
2. Social and economic equity, with access and opportunity for all people has always been important for unions. Issue of addressing poverty, disadvantage, and income inequality is fundamental to our work.
3. Congress believes that participation in decent work is the single most important pathway to address disadvantage for working aged Australians and their families. Congress notes that even during the recent long period of sustained economic growth and declining unemployment, the numbers of working age Australians in receipt of a social security benefit, particularly the numbers on disability benefit, rose, and these numbers will increase during the present economic crisis. Australia's high rate of jobless families with children places children at risk of disadvantage and deprivation, and increased risk of intergeneration disadvantage.
4. The 2003 Congress adopted policies aimed at assisting workers who are marginalised from the workforce, particularly older workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, workers with disability and workers with caring responsibilities. Unions also called for reforms to childcare, disability services and aged care to enable carers to participate in the workforce. This policy builds on that approach.

A Social Inclusion Framework

5. Congress notes that the Federal government, and some state and local governments, have adopted a social inclusion framework to guide the provision of income support and social and community services. Congress welcomes this development, noting that such an approach:

- a) recognises that disadvantage extends beyond poverty and material deprivation and include inability to participate in economic, social, cultural and political life;
 - b) acknowledges multiple and often cumulative barriers to participation;
 - c) addresses the processes that lead to disadvantage not just the symptoms through equitable access to universal services, supplemented with early intervention programmes to minimise the risk of disadvantage, and targeted, tailored programmes that are responsive to individuals and communities; and
 - d) includes the active involvement of communities so people have a say about what services they need and have a responsibility to make use of the opportunities provided.
6. Congress endorses the Federal Government's social inclusion priorities of homelessness, indigenous disadvantage, employment of people with mental health and disability concerns, children at risk and jobless families.
 7. Congress calls on the government to add support for people with disabilities and their carers to that list of priorities.
 8. Congress also calls on government to recognise the need to recruit, retain, develop and reward the workforce that delivers its social inclusion programmes, including programmes that assist workers into decent jobs.

Promoting Labour Force Participation

9. Providing greater opportunities for people to participate in decent work is the primary means by which people of working age can avoid social exclusion. Participation in paid employment enhances both national prosperity and social equity.
10. The structure of income support payments and the rate at which payments are withdrawn should not act as a disincentive to participation in paid employment.
11. The current structure of differential payments for disability support, sole parents, and unemployed, discourages recipients of higher payments from testing the labour market. Congress supports the removal of the distinction between pensions and allowances, to be replaced with a single, adequate income support payment payable regardless of the reason that an individual is outside the labour force. Such payment should be supplemented to reflect the individual's costs (eg disability, children, and rent).

12. Employment services should be tailored to assist individuals throughout the stages of their life. Programmes should acknowledge transitional periods in people's lives and account for them. Congress welcomes the announced changes to employment services to include a greater focus on disadvantaged job seekers, employer servicing and local labour markets.
13. Under the previous Government's "Welfare to Work" approach, beneficiaries of unemployment, disability and sole parent benefits faced income withdrawn if they failed an activity test. Congress notes that the harshest aspects of these policies will be addressed by the new compliance framework that focuses on reengagement not punishment.
14. Unions believe that, where income support is conditional upon an activity test, the test should be sufficiently flexible to reflect the complexity of people's lives. Activity tests should recognise any caring and community responsibilities of the recipient; acknowledge barriers to participation such as discrimination by employers; and be administered fairly while being sufficiently flexibility to take account of an individual's circumstances. In no circumstances should an activity test require an individual to accept employment that leaves them or their family financially worse off.
15. Workforce participation programmes must address deficiencies in the demand for workers who have trouble obtaining decent work. Unions believe it is wasteful and demoralising to prepare people for jobs that do not exist.
16. Disadvantaged workers are often discriminated in the workforce and can face inflexible and unsupportive working arrangements. Unions have a special responsibility to campaign against discrimination of this kind. Government intervention is also required.
17. Not all work is socially inclusive. Under-employment and the associated lack of secure work, low wages, long hours of work, or long and complex commutes to and from work, exclude people from fully participating in social, family and community activities. The ACTU and unions support decent work opportunities. The design of workplaces should be inclusive.

Young people

18. In the current economic environment there is a special need to focus resources on school leavers. Congress welcomes the Government's focus on measures to keep young people in education and training, particularly through flexible learning opportunities, managed transitions, and access to accredited training while at school.
19. However, these measures must be accompanied by targeted assistance for young people who have left the education and training system. The Government should remove disincentives for young people re-entering formal training. Congress supports consideration of aligning the rates of income support for Newstart and Austudy.
20. Public policy has not kept pace with the level of student participation in part time employment. Young people are often poorly protected at work. Congress notes the Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy calls for formal recognition of the skills obtained by students in their casual and part time jobs. In addition, unions will bargain for study and examination leave for working students, and will guard against indirectly discriminatory practices.

Older workers

21. Congress reaffirms its commitment to actively oppose discrimination on the basis of age, including in relation to older workers.
22. Congress supports the right of workers to retire at 55 or older. Financial security is critical to the exercise of this choice. As such Congress opposes increasing the preservation age for superannuation, the eligibility age, or other conditions for receipt of the age pension. However, Congress also supports the right of workers to continue in employment after the normal retiring age, including their ability to access transitional arrangements such as part-time work.
23. Congress notes that discrimination by employers can make the activity test imposed on older workers in receipt of Newstart demoralising and counterproductive. In thin labour markets older workers should be able to satisfy their job search requirements through volunteer activities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

24. Congress notes that the ACTU Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy deals comprehensively with measures to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into meaningful work. Union's immediate role in workplaces address discrimination and ensure work practices, including access to family and personal leave, are inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people

25. Congress notes that there are comprehensive ACTU policies dealing covering workers the reality is there is a need for more education to put these policies into practice. Congress supports the move towards full legislative equality for LGBT workers. Unions must work to eliminate discrimination and homophobia in all workplaces.

Workers with disability

26. Congress reaffirms the policies from 2003, which acknowledged that workers with disability are entitled to decent, safe and secure work opportunities, and recognised the importance of education and training for workers with disability. Congress confirms the commitment of the ACTU, labour councils and unions to organise workers with disability, and to use the organising role to utilise the talents of workers with disabilities.
27. Congress notes that the Federal Government is developing a National Mental Health and Disability Employment Strategy that aims to address barriers people with disability and/or mental illness experience in gaining and maintaining employment. Congress welcomes the priority areas for action including: removal of all service caps; supporting employers; engaging with people with disability regarding barriers such as transport and equipment; direct employment by government of people with disability; and improved access to training.
28. Congress notes with particular concern the dramatic reduction in the percentage of people with disabilities being employed by the Commonwealth in the last decade. Congress calls on the Federal Government to require as a significant Key Performance Indicator for all Secretaries of all Government Departments and the Heads of all Statutory Authorities that they must meet targets to increase the number of people with disabilities employed by Departments and Statutory Authorities, and that the achievement of such targets is linked to Secretary bonus payment schemes.
29. The ACTU will continue to work with the disability community to ensure the award system, including the supported wage system functions fairly. In particular, the ACTU will explore with the disability community and Federal Government, the rationalisation of the number of wage assessment tools used by Australian Business Enterprises.

Workers with caring responsibilities

30. Carers report that the barriers to employment include: the lack or cost of alternative available care; the disruption to the person to whom they provide care; loss of skills and the lack of suitable hours of work.

31. Australia's employment rate of lone parents remains low relative to comparable nations, and the risks for children growing up in jobless households means that joblessness amongst sole parents requires special attention.
32. Workplaces and policies that support carers to combine informal care and paid employment are essential but not sufficient to assist carers participate in paid employment.
33. The Work and Family Policy seeks to implement the provision of working arrangements that facilitate combining work and care. In addition to this, unions strongly support adequate resources to allow persons who are provided care the ability to make appropriate choices about their needs that may also facilitate carers participating in paid employment.
34. Carers seeking to re-enter the labour force should be assisted through a "returning to earning" programme that supports the costs of: course fees, care, travel required to attend training courses, and return to work expenses such as uniforms.
35. The carer income support system should not act as a disincentive to work. Congress calls for greater flexibility in the Carer Payment, particularly around the withdrawal of payment after 25 hours per week (including travel), which is counterproductive to carers combining care, employment and education.
36. Congress notes with particular concern the disadvantage faced by young carers. -Congress believes that it is completely inappropriate that minors should be required to perform a caring role and calls on the government to implement strategies to ensure that this not occur.

The Provision of Care

37. Promoting participation in paid employment for working age Australians is essential but not sufficient to ensure an inclusive society. Congress recognises that improved access to affordable housing, transport, justice, and programmes to prevent family violence, resettle refugees and build communities, are integral to addressing disadvantage regardless of whether individuals are in work, seeking work, or are not seeking paid employment.
38. Demographic changes highlight the fact that the access to high quality care, and the ability to provide care, is increasingly a public, not private matter. Particularly important for those in or seeking work are access to early childhood education and care, disability care, aged care, and support for those providing the care.

Early childhood

39. Children should have the best possible start in life. Access to quality maternal and child health and early childhood education is the starting point of our commitment to equal opportunity for all Australians.
40. A safe, supportive and stimulating environment fosters children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development, and gives them the best chance of becoming healthy adults.
41. In addition to the Work and Family policies that support working parents having the time and resources to care for their children, Congress reiterates its support for universal access to high quality early childhood education and care.
42. Congress notes that some progress has been made towards the priorities identified at the 2003 Congress, including:
 - a) a commitment to universally provide 15 hours a week of early childhood education taught by a four-year university qualified early childhood teacher for every child in the year before they start school;
 - b) capital and recurrent funding for 260 early learning and care centres;
 - c) set of draft national quality standards and regulatory arrangements;
 - d) additional places and fee relief to improve the skills of childcare professionals, and the development of a workforce strategy for the early years.
43. In noting this major reform and re-skilling agenda in the early childhood education and care sector supports additional targeted funding to this sector to facilitate significant bargaining improvements to early childhood education and care workers' wages and conditions.
44. Congress supports the development of national quality standards, provided they do not result in a lowering of standards.
45. Congress notes that the collapse of ABC Learning and CFK Childcare Centres highlights the need for increased government planning in the allocation of government funding to early childhood education and care.
46. Congress supports the provision of public and community sector childcare.

People with disability

47. Congress affirms its support for people with disabilities, families and carers. Congress acknowledges the right of people with disabilities to services and support that enables them to fully participate in society in independent living and in employment.
48. Congress recognises the essential role of paid care and support workers whom many people with disabilities, and their families, depend upon. The skill and work of these employees is currently undervalued and needs to be properly and fairly recognised.

Supporting Carers

49. Individuals who provide full time care and support to dependants face increased risk of social exclusion. Many carers experience financial hardship, and have difficulty participating in paid employment, education and training. This is often coupled with isolation and poor health. Caring for people with disability, or the frail elderly, need to be supported with both financial support and recognition of their role. Respite care for carers is essential to safeguard the health of those who undertake the informal caring work.
50. Congress notes that the recent House of Representatives Report of the Inquiry into Better Support for Carers found carers face: a lack of recognition of their role; difficulties in accessing information and support; financial stress as a consequence of opportunity costs, lack of government support and the costs of caring; and, dissatisfaction with community care.

A National Social Entitlement Scheme for People with Disabilities

51. Congress calls for the thorough examination of a fully funded, no-fault, national disability insurance scheme. Such a scheme should not displace workers' compensation or transport accident schemes. It should go further than the current proposal, agreed to by Community and Disability Services Ministers in 2008, for nationally consistent outcomes for motor vehicle accident victims and development of a no-fault catastrophic injury scheme.
52. Congress notes that these initiatives will not deliver a national universal care and support based entitlement system covering all people with a disability, so that such people and their families can participate in ordinary lives that the non disabled community takes for granted. For a large group of people with disabilities, care and support is not guaranteed. There is a major unmet demand for services and a growing unmet liability to deliver those service entitlements.

53. Congress believes the time has come for a transformational change in the approach to addressing disability support and care in Australia. Congress believes that now is the time to examine the feasibility of introducing a national social entitlement scheme. Such a scheme should provide a life long entitlement, disabled person-centered support and care, and could sit alongside compulsory superannuation and Medicare as a visionary economic and social reform.
54. The ACTU and unions will work closely with disability organisations, the private sector and State and Commonwealth Governments to campaign for a national social insurance scheme for people with disabilities.

Housing and Homelessness

55. Participation in all forms of community life depends upon access to adequate and affordable housing. Congress welcomes the Federal government's nomination of homelessness as a priority for social inclusion, and its significant financial commitment to increase the supply of social and public housing.
56. Congress welcomes recent initiatives by state governments to integrate housing services with health disability, employment and other support services.
57. Congress also welcomes the National Rental Affordability Scheme to stimulate investment in affordable rental stock.
58. Congress calls for policies to support:
 - a) Partnerships between public, community and private sectors that encourage investment in affordable rental housing and first home ownership;
 - b) Debt for equity swaps to assist older Australians remain in their homes with dignity; and,
 - c) New financing arrangements to support home buyers such as shared equity, subject to appropriate consumer protection regulation.

The Provision of Services

Funding model

59. The use of competitive tendering in the provision of social and community services is inimical to the provision of the highest quality services for the most disadvantaged and marginalised in our community. Competitive tendering is based on an assumption that the lowest cost base for the delivery of services is best for government.

Such models of funding do not adequately reflect an appreciation and recognition of the needs of those who use the services.

60. Congress calls for social and community services to be funded on “cost basis” models such as those used to fund health and education. Funding contracts should also recognise the advocacy role played by social and community sector providers. This role is important in providing a voice to the recipients of services.
61. Congress notes with caution the emerging support for social or community enterprises to deliver intermediate labour markets for people currently excluded from paid employment. Congress notes the lack of evidence about the lasting effect of this approach.

Workforce issues

62. Delivery of the services outlined requires a highly skilled, highly committed, and properly rewarded workforce. An inclusive society does not build the capacity of its citizens by exploiting the compassion of those who provide services and care to those who are vulnerable and at risk.
63. Workforce issues are widely seen as a key constraint to the successful implementation of the delivery of services, with low wages, high turnover and difficulty attracting and retaining staff seen as critical. Congress supports the following measures designed to attract and retain a quality and skilled workforce:
 - a) Increased funding to improve wages and conditions of employment. At a minimum there should be no gap between workers in the not-for-profit or funded sector and those doing work of similar value in the public sector;
 - b) Encourage mobility within the sector through the development of a portable long service leave scheme;
 - c) Career paths that recognise skills and experience, and allows mobility throughout the industry;
 - d) Lengthening of funding rounds in order to increase workforce stability;
 - e) A national workforce attraction and retention strategy involving investment in education and training, including strategies to address the shortage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to address the shortage of rural remote/regional workers.