

Social Inclusion

Developments since Congress 2009

Since Congress 2009, a number of key campaigns and legislative developments have occurred to put social inclusion in the spotlight.

A key change occurred with the introduction of the *Fair Work Act 2009* ("FW Act"), which provided for carers of preschool-aged children and children under 18 years with a disability to request a flexible working arrangement from their employers. In addition, the Commonwealth Government introduced its paid parental leave policy in January 2010. This provides for 18 weeks of pay at the minimum wage for primary carers, and from 2013, Dad and Partner Pay will provide for two weeks of concurrent leave for secondary carers.

In addition, the National Quality Framework was established in 2012 to improve quality childcare options and staff-children ratios for childcare centres, and to provide staff with opportunities to receive formal childcare qualifications. These initiatives will provide encouragement for women and carers to more fully participate in the workforce while also meeting their family responsibilities.

In 2011, the Commonwealth Government committed to fund pay increases for low-paid workers in the Social and Community Sector (SACS) as part of the ASU's Equal Pay Case. This followed a decision made by Fair Work Australia that found that workers in the SACS sector were paid less than their counterparts in the public sector, with gender playing a significant role in the historical underpayment of this sector.

Workers with a disability, and those who care for people with a disability, will also benefit from increased support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which will provide insurance to fund long-term care and support for Australians who suffer from a significant, debilitating injury. The NDIS will be rolled out from mid-2014 and is expected to be fully implemented by 2018-2019.

The Commonwealth Government has also recently unveiled the *Living Longer. Living Better* aged-care reform package, which provides \$3.7 billion over five years to provide more options for in-home care, improve the quality of residential care, and strengthen the aged care workforce. These measures will provide additional resources to older Australians, thereby encouraging increased social and economic participation in the context of an ageing workforce.

Key issues

As at March 2011, the labour force participation rate was 65.3%, with unemployment at 5.2%. In June 2011, there were 1.2 million jobless families in Australia, with 13.9% of children living in jobless families. At March 2010, 52% of all jobless families have been without paid employment for at least three years, suggesting that there are systemic and persistent barriers to some workers in accessing paid employment. The vast majority (89%) of jobless families are headed by single mothers, and almost one in three single parent families are jobless, indicating that family and caring responsibilities act as a significant barrier to paid employment.

The bulk of caring and domestic work is still carried out by women, although this division of labour in households is changing as more women enter and remain in the paid labour force. Women's participation in the labour force has steadily increased to 59% at August 2011. Women now constitute half of the Australian labour market and the majority of couple families (57%) now have both parents working. This coincides with the increased demand by workers for a range of leave entitlements to help balance work and family responsibilities.

In 2009-2010, one third (34%) of all Australians over 55 years were engaged in paid employment, an increase of 9% in the past three decades. Older Australians comprised 16% of the total labour force, which is an increase of 6% over the past 30 years. These statistics indicate greater labour force participation by older Australians as our population ages. However, older Australians do face particular barriers to participating in the workforce, from age-based discrimination to ill health and lack of flexible work arrangements.

Young workers also find it difficult to engage in meaningful employment, particularly given the increasing trend towards casual and irregular employment. Where workers under 21 do find employment, they are often paid junior wages, which can be less than 50% of the adult rate of pay. Recent moves to reduce the minimum shift engagement to 1.5 hours for secondary school students in the general retail sector have also made it difficult for junior employees to participate in meaningful paid employment.

Indigenous Australians also face additional hurdles in engaging in the labour force. In 2010, 56% of Indigenous Australians participated in paid employment, with unemployment remaining steady at 18%. Unemployment among Aboriginal Australians was higher in rural and regional areas compared to major cities. Institutional factors, including poor quality housing, lack of educational opportunities, and scarce access to health services, all have a negative impact on labour force participation among Indigenous communities.

Agenda 2012-2015

ACTU Congress Social Inclusion policy identifies certain vulnerable groups who face significant barriers in fully participating in the paid workforce. These include:

- People with family and caring responsibilities;
- Young people;
- Older people;

- Indigenous Australians;
- People with a disability;
- People from non-English speaking backgrounds;
- Members of the LGBTI community;
- People experiencing family or domestic violence; and
- People living in rural and remote areas.

Participation in the labour force is vital to social inclusion; promoting financial independence, community engagement and positive mental and physical health.

Over the next three years, this policy provides that unions will advocate for the following priorities aimed at improving the capacity for all Australians to participate in meaningful, paid employment:

- Access to working arrangements which accommodate caring responsibilities, education commitments and transition to retirement;
- Secure employment with decent minimum wages and conditions and protection from discrimination;
- Access to affordable, quality, culturally appropriate community services such as early childhood education and care, public transport, housing and decent health services training opportunities;
- Adequate funding of public support services and investment in decent wages and conditions for workers to ensure a sustainable, quality community services sector; and
- A decent welfare and social security safety net that helps and encourages people to participate in the paid workforce.