

Skilled migration changes on the right track: unions

Major changes to Australia's skilled migration program announced today will better target skills shortfalls, but need to be accompanied by tighter labour market testing to ensure Australians are given job opportunities, say unions.

The ACTU welcomed the reforms to the permanent skilled migration program announced today, which would both target skills needs and reduce exploitation of workers from overseas.

"This is a welcome initiative," said ACTU President Sharan Burrow.

"It recognises that Australia needs to more effectively integrate migration policy with national workforce and skills planning.

"Reforms such as the removal of the Migration Occupations in Demand List and its replacement with the new Skilled Occupations List, along with the proposed review of the points test, will better target future skills needs.

"Skills Australia is the right body to develop this new list."

Ms Burrow said the changes would undo bad policy by the Howard Government that had led to foreign workers being exploited with no guarantee of decent work.

Tightening migration to focus on labour needs rather than uncapped migration and unregulated training schemes was positive, but without proper labour market testing, employers could still deny Australian workers job opportunities.

"We continue to have outstanding concerns that the migration program relies excessively on uncapped, temporary, employer-sponsored migration dictated by short-term employment cycles," Ms Burrow said.

"We call on the Government to reform and retain a Critical Skills List which identifies skills in high demand in the immediate or short-term.

"Having such a list in place would enable permanent skilled migrants with these skills to be brought in through priority processing arrangements to address immediate skills deficits, and avoids temporary migration visas being seen as the only response."