

Thursday 23 September 2021

Cairns workers lower paid and more insecure than most Australians

1 in 3 workers in Cairns are casual and have lower wages and less reliable employment than the rest of the nation according to a new report released today by the Queensland Council of Unions and ACTU. The Australian average for casual employment is 21.9 per cent.

The report, titled Spotlight on Job Insecurity and wages in Far North Queensland also shows that workers in Cairns earn 8% less than the national average.

Insecure work puts people's lives on hold and places tremendous financial and emotional strain on families struggling to make ends meet or balance work life commitments.

Casual workers are supposed to receive a 25 per cent loading in exchange for no leave entitlements or job security – yet Professor David Peetz from Griffith University has found that less than half receive any loading and most still earn less than their permanent colleagues performing the same work.

Most casual workers in Queensland are women, and 2 in 5 of them are under the age of 25.

The situation in Cairns has been worsened by COVID-19, with the majority of insecure workers being in the accommodation, food, and health care industries. The Cairns economy is heavily reliant on tourism to provide work for local people. Local insecure workers are often the first to lose their jobs because of the knock-on effects of COVID.

Frontline workers are not immune to overcasualisation with many nurses contracted to work anywhere between 8 and 40 hours per week with no reliability or consistency. This puts immense strain on our healthcare workers and their lives, mental health, and financial security.

Rather than acting to end the insecure work crisis, the Morrison Government has recently passed laws that give employers greater powers to define any worker as a casual, irrespective of the true nature of their work.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Secretary Sally McManus:

“1 in 3 workers in Cairns are casual, making them lower paid and more insecure than the rest of the country.

“Insecure work forces workers into a lifestyle of instability and uncertainty, with many under tremendous financial and emotional strain often unable to plan ahead, balance work and life, or make ends meet.

“Casual employment gives all the power to employers, making it difficult for workers to bargain for better pay or rights – and the Morrison Government has condemned more workers into insecurity by passing laws that ensure employers can label any worker as casual irrespective of the true nature of their work.

“Cairns is one of the hardest hit regions of the pandemic, with their food, accommodation and tourism industries fighting to survive as most of the country is unable to travel. It's critical that workers in the area receive adequate support so that they can spend money locally and help regional recovery.

“Our frontline healthcare workers are not immune to overcasualisation, with many nurses working anywhere between 8 and 40 hours – with any gap hours spent staying at home and waiting by the phone hoping for more work to come in. Their lives are on hold, and their mental health and financial stability compromised. This is not how we should be repaying our pandemic heroes.

“The recovery from the pandemic is an opportunity to create more secure jobs in Cairns and end this crisis. The Morrison Government must step up to the task of regulating the overuse of contract, temporary and casual employment.”

Media contact: Isabella Tilley 0414 894 040