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First Nations Workplace Symposium discusses reform ahead of Jobs Summit

Workplace reforms for First Nations peoples are being discussed by the First Nations Employment Alliance at the First Nations Workplace Symposium in Canberra today ahead of the Jobs and Skills Summit.

The Alliance is made up of peak bodies, practitioners, consultants, unions, academics, and community organisations with the joint principle of listening deeply to fellow First Nations people to create a positive and self-determined future.

Rafts of government and corporate efforts have previously relied on assumptions, imposing Western employment paradigms on First Nations peoples.

They've failed to acknowledge the history of employment exclusion in Australia, the diversity of First Nations people and the considerable longstanding and current impacts of racism, both in the broader community where it impacts workforce participation (for example through education) and systematically, both overtly and covertly in workplaces.

Together the Alliance has developed seven shared goals to take to the Jobs Summit:

1. An investigation into workplace racism and discrimination (overt and covert) against First Nations people, heard through a series of public activities and inquiries culminating in a multi-legal approach. The Workplace Racism Inquiry should be conducted by the Fair Work Commission and Human Rights Commission (as at the intersection of both legal frameworks) with recommendations.
2. An inquiry into First Nations pay equity and mechanisms to address it including superannuation with recommendations and mechanisms to resolve the issue.
3. The redevelopment of self-determined, properly resourced community employment programs, such as CDP, to ensure proper wages for work and work-like activities. Workers must be given adequate workplace conditions, including leave, super, access to worker compensation and Workcover. There must be investment into meaningful jobs on country, with programs leading to sustainable full or part-time employment with meaningful community input and control. Work should be meaningful and include cultural and unpaid labour and care, cultural caring for land and country, skills, and training. Employment programs must lead to genuine employment outcomes and no program should have work like activities, paid or unpaid, for long periods of time.
4. At this time of considering the role of First Nations people in this place and a possible treaty, the insertion of Cultural matters must be included into industrial instruments and employment legal frameworks
5. Consideration of community responsibility, care and caring for land and country redefined as 'work' in the Australian work paradigm

6. The Government must realign portfolios, currently sitting in the NIAA, to the corresponding (mainstream) Minister to ensure First Nations employment, training and skills, education, economic participation, and job creation are considered across the economic and policy making platforms of the government.
7. A workplace relations system that reflects our community's needs. A system that ensures stolen money is returned quickly, and a system that is local and accessible. Our workplace relations system cannot be one size fits all, it must be flexible and allow mob to make collective agreements that reflect our needs and our communities. First Nations organisations need to be able to make agreements that cover multiple organisations and that suit our needs. There should be no restrictions on what can be included in these agreements.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Indigenous Officer Lara Watson:

“This Symposium intends to formally launch the Alliance, listen to mob, and establish a work plan and strategy to explore the future of First Nations employment that is First Nations led and implemented.

“First Nations peoples have had government programs and structures imposed onto them since colonisation, and it has never worked. If real change is what the Government wants then all practices, including towards work, must prioritise self-determination.

“CDP was racist, punitive, and blatantly targeted Indigenous communities, it's great to see its removal. The Albanese Government must now work with communities to establish programs that invest in country, culture, skills, and training, and lead to secure, well-paid employment.

“Positive change starts with knowing what needs to be changed – we need an investigation into systemic and covert workplace racism against First Nations people, and an inquiry into First Nations pay equity.

“We look forward to working with the Albanese Government at the upcoming Jobs Summit to deliver positive change.”

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