



SOCIAL WAGE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Introduction

1. The gap between rich and poor in Australia is at a 70-year high, and Australia must face up to the challenge of rising inequality. With unemployment at high levels and working people struggling to maintain adequate living standards, it is more important than ever for the Government to step in and provide a strong social safety net. The Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has reinforced this truth and demonstrated the ability of the government to deliver higher living standards for the disadvantaged when it rouses itself to do so.
2. Public goods and services, such as universal healthcare, superannuation and public education, all form part of the social wage – that is, they are paid for by workers through income taxation and redistribution. Therefore workers, as a group, have a right to decide how their wages should best be distributed in order to redress rising inequality and provide an adequate safety net for all members of society.
3. The Australian union movement was instrumental in introducing key social reforms, such as Medicare and compulsory superannuation, which was paid for through the deferral of wage increases as part of a social compact to protect and provide for our most vulnerable members of society. Australian unions will continue to be an important voice in discussions around how our collective revenue should be spent so as to improve social conditions for all.
4. Congress recognises that all Australians must have access to a decent welfare safety net, affordable services, and equal opportunity to be included in society and to participate in the labour market through access to decent work.

Workforce participation

5. Every Australian deserves a job they can count on. A job you can count on means secure work with a living wage and fair conditions, so working people can plan a future for themselves and their families, save for a rainy day, enjoy their leisure time and contribute to their communities. Secure jobs with decent wages and conditions benefits everyone: our communities do better and Australia does better.
6. To ensure that workers are able to participate fully in the labour market, they need access to flexible working arrangements and protection from discrimination.
7. Australians who are actively seeking employment should be supported in their efforts through the provision of affordable, quality community services and a decent social security safety net.

Unemployment and working age payments

8. Congress affirms the mandatory welfare quarantine measures, such as the Basic's Welfare Card & the Cashless Welfare Card are discriminatory & punitive, and have not lead to better outcomes for welfare recipients, and therefore Congress call for the abolition of these measures. Congress is of the view that the Cashless Welfare Card in particular has been implemented is a fundamentally racist program which was first tested on Indigenous Australians and has been primarily targeted at Indigenous communities.
9. At a time of high unemployment, more Australians are relying on the meagre provisions of the Jobseeker payment (formally Newstart), than ever before. Despite this, social security payments have not increased in real terms in two decades. The temporary increase brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic, which represented a long-overdue acknowledgement that the old rate was unliveable, was sadly short lived. Congress condemns the Government for the callous decision to undo the temporary increase while hundreds of thousands of Australians still depended on JobSeeker.
10. Congress affirms that JobKeeper payment is too low to live on and would place a worker and their family in poverty. We call upon the Government to restore the JobKeeper payment to the rate which it considered liveable during the Coronavirus pandemic. This would be done through the restoration of the \$550 coronavirus supplement which would become a permanent part of the payment going forward. Congress recognises this would require the re-evaluation of other payments including the aged and disability pensions which would need to be reviewed to ensure they remain adequate in context of the higher JobSeeker rate.
11. In the meantime, the indexation rates for all social security payments should be aligned so that the widening gap between pensions and allowances may be closed.
12. Moreover, the system for claiming benefits is overly complex, with taper rates that do not provide adequate or sufficient incentive to find and keep work.
13. Incentives should be geared towards placing jobseekers into long term, secure employment rather than churning them through multiple casual engagements.
14. Congress affirms we need jobs we can count on, and we also need to ensure that nobody is left behind and struggling to survive due to insecure work arrangements.
15. While full employment is a goal Congress commits to realising, in the interim Congress affirms Australia's social security system must be designed in a way that recognises the current reality that 40% of workers are in insecure work and may need income support.

Unpaid work for the unemployed

16. Congress condemns the current Government's reliance on unpaid work, through Work for the Dole, PaTH and the Community Development Programme (WFD) scheme
17. Forcing the unemployed to undertake unpaid work distorts the labour market by displacing actual paid jobs, and there is no evidence that it leads to ongoing employment. Moreover, it restricts jobseekers from attending other job search activities such as interviews or training.
18. Where jobseekers are performing productive work for an enterprise, Congress affirms that the worker must be paid at least the minimum wage for their work. Congress particularly condemns the practice of jobseekers undertaking unpaid work placements in for-profit businesses.
19. Australian unions will continue to campaign against unpaid work arrangements.

Community services

20. If Australians are to have access to high quality community services, aged care, early childhood education and care (ECEC), and health services in their local community, the workforce providing these services must be properly valued and remunerated.
21. Congress congratulates union members in the social and community services sector who fought for and won an historic equal pay case – increasing award minimum wages for thousands of workers in Australia. However, we note that there are a number of workers in professions, such as nursing, ECEC, and aged care, who remain low paid. Australian unions remain committed to advocating for equal pay for those workers.
22. Australia is faced with a critical shortage of workers in health care, aged care, disability support, social & community support and other caring professions. Congress resolves to campaign on the effects that low wages and poor conditions have on our social services. Congress calls on the Government to develop a national workforce promotion and retention strategy, and to provide more incentives for students to follow career paths in these professions.
23. Congress acknowledges that job security and quality service provision go hand in hand in the funding of community services. Congress therefore advocates for government funding of the community services sector that provides stability of funding, fosters collaboration rather than competition between providers and ensures a fair playing field between smaller local and specialist providers and larger generalist providers.

Women workers

24. Congress notes women workers in particular require special attention in this area, as evidenced by the gender pay gap and gender retirement gap.
25. Women workers face a number of challenges to participating in the roles and number of hours they would like to work while also being required to balance work/caring responsibilities. Many women are experiencing a penalty to wages/retirement savings because of time out of paid work and their need to work part-time or casually.
26. Congress affirms the need to take active steps to close the gender pay gap and gender retirement gap, and for the union movement to fight discrimination faced by women at work.

Young workers

27. Congress recognises the unique circumstances of many young workers, who are often engaged in formal education and training alongside their employment.
28. To ensure an appropriate balance, Congress advocates for the inclusion of study leave and flexible work arrangements that would make it easier for young workers to work and study at the same time.
29. Congress notes that young workers face particular discrimination which affects their pay and conditions, including shorter minimum engagement periods in some awards; lower pay rates than adults performing the same work; and, for workers under 18 doing less than 30 hours of paid employment per week, no employer contributions to superannuation. These legislative clauses and practices are unfair and discriminatory, and Australian unions resolve to redress this through our campaigning and industrial work.

Older workers

30. As the Australian population ages, it is expected that Australians will live longer and retire later. In this context, paid employment can be an important source of social inclusion for older workers.
31. At the same time, older Australians must be given a genuine choice of when and whether to retire, and they should be given the option to retire in dignity, or be given access to flexible working arrangements if they are no longer capable of working in a full-time capacity.
32. Congress notes the decision by the previous Labour government to lift the pension and superannuation eligibility age, which has been continued and extended by subsequent Coalition Government. This has created real inequality, particularly for blue collar and manual workers who are forced to continue working past 65. Congress calls upon a future Labour Government to make provision for reducing the aged pension eligibility age to the previous standard.

Migrant workers

33. Congress recognises that migrant workers, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, face particular challenges in the community and in workplaces.
34. Congress affirms that every worker, no matter where they have come from or what languages they speak, must be treated with fairness, dignity and respect inside and outside the workplace.
35. Congress notes that migrant workers are at particular risk of wage theft, harassment, bullying, discrimination and unsafe practices at work.
36. Congress affirms that the union movement gains strength through diversity and encourages affiliates to organise migrant workers, and ensure workplace materials and workplace rights education is accessible to those who speak languages other than English.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTIQA) workers

37. Congress notes that LGBTIQA workers face particular challenges in the labour market and during employment. In particular, LGBTIQA workers are at greater risk of bullying, discrimination and harassment at work, and these particular issues should be addressed through both legislative and cultural change.
38. Congress affirms that LGBTIQA workers should have access to the same rights and protections as all other workers, and that sexual orientation is rightly classed as a Protection, meaning that employers are in breach of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) if they discriminate against workers on the basis of sexual orientation.
39. Congress acknowledges the unique employment barriers and discrimination that transgender and gender diverse workers face, and that financial and employment security is a substantial barrier preventing transgender and gender diverse workers to transition, socially, medically and/or legally. Nothing that non-gender affirmation in the workplace is overt discrimination, Congress supports more inclusive workplace legislation and EBA clauses to address and support transgender and gender diverse employees.
40. Congress notes the successful union campaign for marriage equality and acknowledges that the fight is not over. Congress encourages affiliates to review their enterprise bargaining agreement processes to be inclusive of rainbow families by removing and reviewing existing gendered language on parental and carers leave clauses, and to fight for adoption and surrogate leave clauses.

41. Congress acknowledges that the rules are broken for LGBTIQ workers and notes its disappointment at the current state of religious exemption legislation. There are currently over 200,000 jobs in Australia where a LGBTIQ worker can legally be fired from if they come out. LGBTIQ workers may come out requesting union won carers, compassionate and/or bereavement leave to face legal termination of employment. Congress calls for the commitment to scrap these legal protection loopholes.
42. Congress supports affiliates in creating a LGBTIQ liaisons organisers portfolio, to support the unique challenges LGBTIQ workers face within the workplace, and to promote union strength and growth through diversity inclusion.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers

43. Congress notes its disappointment in the Government for cutting a number of vital community, health, legal and housing organisations that targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Without these services, it is more difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to participate meaningfully in the workforce.
44. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are less likely to have a job, when employed they are paid less and are more likely to be insecure work, employed casual or part-time. The unemployment rate for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples is 16.6%, 4 times the national rate.
45. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people are paid on average less than Non-Indigenous people & the race pay gap increases each year. Approximately 43% of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander adults were living in households that had experienced days without money for basic living expenses in a 12-month period. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples had lower total personal incomes than other Australians across all labour force categories, particularly for those who were employed fulltime, this is partly due to lower wages, around 18% lower for Indigenous men.

Workers with disability

46. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) requires employers to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace so workers can meet the inherent requirements of the job, but a request may be refused if it would impose 'unjustifiable hardship' on the employer.
47. Section 65 of the Fair Work Act 2009 also enables employees with disability to request a change in working arrangements. Such requests may, however, also be refused on 'reasonable business grounds'. There is currently no right to appeal an employer's refusal of a request for a change in working arrangements.
48. Workers with Disability need greater certainty that they can access flexible working arrangements that assist them to maintain their wellbeing and fitness for work, while maintaining a living wage and consolidating their employment experience.
49. Congress endorses the long-standing recommendations of the Australian Human Rights Commission to amend s.65 of the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth) to include a positive duty on employers to accommodate reasonable requests for flexible working arrangements, and to establish procedural appeals for decisions related to the right to request flexible work arrangements
50. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that many of the barriers to workers, particularly those with disability, being able to work from home and/or with flexible hours were erected by employers rather than being due to inherent requirements of the role.
51. Congress therefore calls for the increased flexibility afforded workers that was so easily achievable when necessary to continue past the duration and resolution of the pandemic.
52. Congress further calls for increased employment opportunities for workers with disability, including those who sustain a disability during their employment.