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ACTU demands worker protections against AI risks

Australian Unions are demanding strong government action to ensure worker rights are fit for purpose and a powerful regulator to protect working Australians from job losses and other serious harms linked to the rollout of Artificial Intelligence technologies.

ACTU Secretary, Melissa Donnelly, told the Joint Senate Select Committee AI Inquiry today, workers currently have almost no control over how AI is developed or used, have had their work stolen and are experiencing job losses, intrusive monitoring and surveillance.

Melissa Donnelly told the AI Inquiry that too many employers treat workers as robots and are introducing AI without basic transparency, meaningful consultation with workers, and in ways that are degrading and intensifying work, making it more dangerous.

She said workers have strikingly little trust in how AI is impacting their work and urged the Committee to endorse genuine regulatory protections, backed up by an empowered regulator with enforcement powers to ensure the fair go is protected in the digital age. Regulatory protections being put in place and properly enforced must be a precondition of large US AI companies being able to train their models in Australia.

Unions are also pressing for enhanced workers' rights fit for the AI-age and national investment in Sovereign AI capability to reduce reliance on US tech giants and to keep jobs and economic benefits flowing to Australians.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Secretary, Melissa Donnelly:

"It is the fundamental responsibility of this Inquiry and our political leaders to ensure the fair go is protected in the digital age and that workers are safe, rights and conditions are protected and we have meaningful careers that we can build, especially for those young workers joining the workforce.

"Just this week, the National Australia Bank announced a decision to axe 2500 staff. Now many of these workers are looking at job cuts right before Christmas. NAB management refused to confirm with the union if the cuts were associated with AI.

"This is a perfect example of the lack of transparency around these decisions that working people have experienced in workplace after workplace, in industry after industry.

"Despite NAB and other banks saying we need to grow and develop tech skills in Australia, they are slashing tech and engineering jobs in these cuts. Now in damage control mode, NAB CEO Andrew Irvine went to the media to deny a connection with AI. If this is the case, why didn't he communicate with his workers about this?

"Also, this week, the Transport Workers Union released research that showed widespread deployment of Robotaxis without protections would risk \$220 million in wages during early-stage rollout, and up to 85,600 job losses.

"Working people are listening to what the big AI companies are telling us about their plans with this tech, and are witnessing what big Australian employers are doing with it, and are asking themselves - Will my job be safe? Am I going to have to relearn everything just to keep in work? Is my boss tracking me in the changeroom? What data are they collecting on me? What are they doing with it? If I lose this

job, how will I get another one? Is AI going to make the decision on if I am hired or not? Will my children even be able to have a meaningful career?

"The Medicare breach was another watershed moment. Not just because it showed the capabilities of these technologies and how dangerous they can be, but because it showed the irresponsibility of the companies developing them – some of the largest and richest in the world.

"OpenAI keeps telling us what we must do to make it easier for them to develop their products here. We know they have knocked down doors to lobby for their changes when it suited them. But when the risk was to us, to Australians, they couldn't even be bothered to send an email to the right address. It is not good enough.

"The tech bros want us to believe that we as a country are powerless. But we are not; we absolutely can be an AI maker and not a taker. But we must do this based on our values, our social contract. This means protecting the fair go so we can pass it on to the next generation."

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