

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into WorkChoices – A New Workplace Relations System

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Mr. John Carter
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The Australian Young Christian Workers (AYCW) wish to raise our concerns that the Federal Government's WorkChoices package will fail to protect young workers, who are some of the most vulnerable workers in Australia.

The AYCW believes that all people have an inherent dignity and worth. Work should develop and enhance this sense of dignity because our work allows us to build positive relationships with those around us and to contribute to the advancement of society. Work helps us to develop a deep sense of our own true worth as well as providing for all our necessary material needs. Work and economic systems should therefore exist to serve the needs of people. Workers, as people, do not exist to serve the needs of "the economy." In the words of the YCW's founder, Joseph Cardijn, *"Every young worker is worth more than all the gold in the world."*

After analysing the Federal Government's proposed changes to the Industrial Relations System, the young workers of the AYCW believe that these proposals wrongly attempt to put profits before people.

According to the ABS (2001) there are 5,289,534 young people aged 15 - 34 years in Australia. This makes up 27.8% of Australia's total population. Within this age bracket there are 3,346,173 (63.3%) young people employed, 378,382 (7.2%) young people unemployed, and 1,383,577 (26.2%) not in the labour force. 181,402 (3.3%) of the youth population did not state their employment status at the time of the 2001 Census.

We are concerned that the 63.3% of young workers already employed and the potential 33.4% of young people attempting to enter the labour force will be in weak bargaining positions; there will be some with low skill levels, and others who will be forced to choose between bad conditions and total unemployment. As AYCW is a movement run for young workers by young workers, we call on the Government to change the proposals to protect the human needs of all workers around Australia and across the world.

We have enclosed a copy of the *An Economy for the People or A People for the Economy?* An analysis developed by the Australian Young Christian Workers on the proposed Industrial Relation changes and the impact these changes will have on young people. Please refer to this paper for further research.

Below is a recent collection of *real* young worker stories from the AYCW membership. These stories highlight young workers vulnerability and illustrate how more young workers will be placed in similar situations. *Please note names have been changed to maintain privacy and confidentiality. For further information please contact me on (08) 9422 7936.*

Jade, aged 29, Occupational Therapist, Perth, WA

Jade recently applied for an Occupational Therapist position with a community organisation on her return from a 5-year working trip in the UK. She was presented with an Australian Workplace Agreement (AWA) and was given 7 days to consider the contract. Jade felt under extreme pressure. Essentially, if she didn't accept the terms and conditions stated in the contract, the job offer would have been withdrawn, leaving Jade unemployed and dis-empowered. This story highlights the vulnerability experienced by young workers when forced to sign AWA's, even those who are educated and qualified.

Melanie, aged 19, Student and Front End Supervisor in Retail, Perth WA

Melanie, like most university students, works in a part time job to subsidize her studies. Melanie, as a part time front-end supervisor at a major Australian food store, has always worked regular hours on a Thursday evening and Saturdays. Without notice, the Monday to Friday full time staff were forced to work the Thursday evening and Saturday shifts on a rotating roster. This staff restructuring has had a huge impact on the stores work environment. Not only were Melanie's responsibilities and hours of work reduced, the full time staff often called in sick due to family responsibilities, leaving weekend shifts short staffed and creating unnecessary friction between workers.

Tom, aged 24, Unemployed, Parramatta, NSW

Tom returned from overseas a short time ago, he is unemployed and registered with Centrelink. He is searching for a job as a travel consultant. Tom was recently offered a job as a travel consultant earning a commission only. The condition was that he would receive \$50 for every airline ticket he sold. Tom was searching for permanent work, however, he was coerced to accept the position, as Centrelink deemed this as a reasonable job offer and would terminate his Centrelink payments if he did not accept the work. The proposed Industrial Relations changes include the reduction of minimum Award conditions creating more tentative work arrangements such as this commission-based job. This story highlights the fact that young people will be pressured into accepting temporary and precarious work as the only alternative to unemployment.

Jack, aged 21, Store Person Trainee, Kellyville, NSW

Jack has been working as a trainee store person employed by a group training company not directly by the organisation he is working for. During his time with this organisation he did not gain the full store person training and experience required as part of his traineeship. He was disappointed that he was left with the menial tasks that no one else wanted to do. However, Jack stuck out the traineeship as he recognised the importance of having this qualification to gain other work. During his traineeship, Jack requested annual leave from his employer to travel to the Philippines to visit a sick family member. By the same afternoon had been told that his services were no longer needed. No reason had been given. Jack is now waiting for the group training company to find him another placement so he can complete his traineeship. He may not be able to find another placement. This story demonstrates how a lack of employment protection endangers young people who have not done anything wrong.

Bob, Brisbane, QLD

Bob, a young refugee man from Afghanistan, approached a fruit and vegetable shop asking about a job. The owner asked him to turn up the next day at 3am. Bob showed up at 3am the next morning by taxi as there was no public transport available at that time of the morning. Bob asked what would he be paid and was told three dollars an hour. He worked for just over three hours and he realized that he would not receive enough money to cover his expenses of getting to work, so he asked for his pay and left. Bob was unaware of what the minimal rate of pay was for that position. This demonstrates how a few exploitative employers may take advantage of workers if the proposed Work Choice system is implemented.

Nick and Joe, Brisbane

Nick and Joe are two refugees who have only been in Australia for a month. They were offered a day's work at a building site. A friend drove them to the site, as they did not have enough money for other transport. They did not know what they were to be paid and did not know what the basic wage was. After working for four hours they asked about the rate of pay and they were informed that it was \$7.80 per hour. Nick and Joe also realized that this would not cover their basic expenses and asked for their money and caught the bus home.

Kyle, Brisbane, QLD

Kyle who has been in Australia for over twelve months on a Temporary Protection Visa has been employed in a cleaning business for most of this time. His employer was happy with his work. His visa was recently transferred to a 'Go Home Visa', which allowed him to access Centrelink benefits. As part of this process it was revealed to him that the firm only employed refugees and as a result, took the cost of the materials he used as part of his job out of his pay.

In light of these *real* young worker experiences coupled with the AYCW's primary belief that "*Every young worker is worth more than all the gold in the world.*" the Australian Young Christian Workers is asking the Federal Government to: -

- Meet with young people and listen to their *real* life experiences at work.
- Protect security of employment for all workers including access to affordable unfair dismissal laws.
- Ensure that all workers have a fair and equal bargaining position by protecting the ability of workers to collectively organise through strong and effective trade unions.
- Ensure that the minimum wage is set as a family living wage rather than a single adult wage.
- Protect the human rights of workers to have appropriate time for rest, leisure and family life by making breaks and holidays non-negotiable.
- Ensure that a culture is promoted where work and the economy are viewed as tools that can achieve the dignity of all people in our society, rather than a culture of people as tools for economic advancement.
- Hold another more extensive, comprehensive, open and public Senate Inquiry that listens to community concerns about the proposals.

The Australian YCW is one of the only organisations giving a voice to young workers who have been targeted by those in society who believe that the exploitation of young workers is an acceptable price for "economic advances". Please seriously consider this submission as part of the Inquiry into Work Choices – A New Workplace Relations System on behalf of all Australian young workers.

Yours sincerely,

Sara Kane
National Secretary
Australian Young Christian Workers