

Wednesday, 9 March 2011

Urgent action is needed to lift wages and conditions of apprentices, say unions

Better trade training wages and conditions are needed to lift apprenticeship completion rates as part of an effective response to the future skills needs of the Australian economy and its workers, and to provide good, fulfilling jobs for young Australians, say unions.

For Australia to continue to have a viable apprenticeship system to provide future skilled labour needs rather than relying too heavily on temporary migrant labour, reforms are needed to improve wages, the lack of quality training and other support structures in the workplace, said the ACTU.

Fair Work Australia should resume a review of training wages now that a major report into the future of the apprenticeship system has been released, and employers must accept greater responsibility for training and skills development.

Meeting in Melbourne today, unions are also urging the Federal Government to act urgently on the review recommendations, and consider an Employer Contribution Scheme to encourage industry to train future workers.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said low wages and poor conditions were identified as one of the major causes for the poor rate of apprenticeship completions of less than 50%.

“Unions will be campaigning this year for solutions to the trend towards insecure employment, and any discussion about good jobs must begin with our young people,” Ms Kearney said.

“Tens of thousands of young Australians each year begin their working life as apprentices, learning skills and trades that are essential to drive our national economic growth. But within a few years, half of them have dropped out. In many cases, not because they want to, but because they struggle to make ends meet on as little as \$300 a week.

“A first year plumber will earn as little as \$262.34 a week – not much more than the single person’s Newstart allowance of \$234.85. People are entering apprentices at later ages and often have to support a family as well as themselves.

“We need to have an effective apprenticeship system so Australia is not forced to rely too heavily on temporary skilled migration. We also need an effective apprenticeship system so young Australians can have decent, quality jobs for life. Improving training wages is an important part of reforming the apprenticeship system to meet those challenges.”

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union National Secretary Dave Oliver was a member of the review panel and called for the government to act on the recommendations quickly.

He said the Federal Government had been too quick in ruling out an Employer Contribution Scheme for the apprenticeship system. Such a scheme would channel funds from all organisations in certain industries into a central training pool, and provide a rebate for those organisations that take on apprentices and provide them with quality on-the-job training.

“Employers can’t complain about skills shortages on one hand, and refuse to invest in training on the other,” Mr Oliver said.

Media contact:
Ben Ruse: 0407 030 808