

Wednesday 16 June 2021

ACTU calls for transparency on UK-Australia Free Trade Deal

The UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement has been negotiated in secret for almost a year and the legal text of the agreement still have not been released, with the only detail about the deal coming from Prime Ministers Morrison and Johnson.

There is no publicly available detail on what protections there will be against the exploitation of workers through the visa system, and no guarantee the agreement will create good jobs in each country as there has been no independent economic modelling. Unlike the UK, Australia has no independent approval process for trade agreements.

It also appears that the Morrison Government has done a deal with big agricultural employers to replace labour from the working holiday visa program with even more access to vulnerable workers from ASEAN countries.

Workers continue to be kept in the dark with trade unions not consulted – but there is mounting evidence that the UK will remove labour market testing, which would allow Australian employers to fill vacancies through visa programs without first determining whether there are local workers who could do the job. Documents from the UK's Department of International Trade states 'Aussie firms will no longer have to prioritise hiring Australians nationals first'.

The ACTU calls on the Australian Government to release the text of the Agreement before it is signed so that there may be a democratic process with public scrutiny and independent assessment of its costs and benefits. The UK and Australian Governments must also immediately engage with trade unions to address long-standing concerns about protections for working people.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil:

“The Australian Government is yet again entering into an agreement in secret which will impact workers across the country. It is critical that Prime Minister Morrison does not sign an agreement without labour market testing – this would allow employers unrestricted access to easily exploited temporary migrant workers and undermine the local labour market by driving down wages and conditions. We do not want to see the continuation of the horrendous conditions for Working Holiday Makers for those on a new agriculture visa, where some workers are paid as little as \$3 an hour.

“A fact sheet tweeted by the UK Trade Minister gives our best insight into the objectives of the deal, claiming “Aussie Firms will no longer have to prioritise hiring Australian nationals first.””

“The end of the 88 day work requirement on farms for British citizens in order to extend their visa by 12 months for working holiday visa holders is simply being replaced with even more vulnerable workers from ASEAN countries and a new British agriculture visa. Numerous

investigations have shown that the visa programs which allow employers to bring these workers into Australia are broken and enable systemic exploitation.

“The Australian and UK Governments have been secretive throughout the entire trade negotiations process, and there has been no independent, union or public scrutiny. We call on the governments to be transparent and immediately begin consultations with trade unions about the details of the agreement.

“This Agreement has no guarantee of creating good jobs as there has been no independent economic modelling – once again the Morrison Government is putting business first.

“It is highly concerning that there is mounting evidence in the UK that this Agreement will see an end to labour market testing, which will see important labour protections removed.”

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