

Wednesday 28 July 2021

RCEP agreement will legitimise the military dictatorship in Myanmar and fails to provide benefit to Australian workers.

The ACTU has called on the Morrison Government not to ratify the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, which includes Myanmar's military junta, at today's JSCOT inquiry.

RCEP has been negotiated behind closed doors between Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Despite its size, there is no evidence that the RCEP agreement will benefit Australian workers.

The ACTU argues that ratifying RCEP will:

- Legitimise the Tatmadaw military junta dictatorship in Myanmar which has already killed over 900 innocent civilians.
- Fail to protect the rights of workers by having no reference to international labour standards or human rights standards. Many of the RCEP signatories, including China and Indonesia have poor human and workers' rights records; the Australian Government should instead be using trade agreements to improve working conditions and address issues of labour exploitation, including slavery and child labour.

Moreover, RCEP does not provide benefits for Australian workers. Ratifying RCEP will:

- Not protect the right of the Australian Government to regulate our aged care sector. The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has exposed a system in crisis and made many recommendations regarding regulation. RCEP rules could prevent new regulation in these areas, including ensuring adequate staffing levels and qualification requirements.
- Fail to ensure labour market testing for all RCEP countries which will allow exploitation of temporary migrants.
- Not provide economic benefits to Australia as there has been no independent economic and social assessment, and there will be no increase in market access. RCEP would put Australia in a worse position. There are empirical economic studies from the Asian Development Bank that suggest the incremental change to Australia's GDP will be 0.0 per cent to 2030.

The ACTU calls on the Morrison Government to urgently commission an independent social, economic and health assessment of the RCEP, and to renegotiate the agreement to ensure protection for workers' rights, human rights, and the ability of the Australian Government to regulate essential services such as aged care.

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil:

"RCEP is the biggest trade deal in history, covering one third of the world's population – it must go through independent assessments to ensure that it ultimately benefits workers and does not enable further exploitation in global supply chains.

"The Morrison Government dodged transparency at every point. RCEP will mean the Australian Government may be limited in their ability to enact the recommendations of the Aged Care Royal Commission, including ensuring minimum staffing and qualification levels – it effectively trades away our ability as a nation to provide the highest standard of care to older Australians.

"We should not be signing a trade deal with a military dictatorship. 900 innocent civilians have already been killed by the military junta in Myanmar – while other democracies such as the US, UK, Canada and the EU are imposing economic sanctions against the military junta to stop the flow of money to the regime, the Morrison Government is

pushing ahead with a new trade agreement with Myanmar, which will only serve to legitimise and entrench the brutal military dictatorship.

“The Morrison Government should be taking a strong stance against modern slavery by banning the import of products made with forced labour including goods from the Xinjiang region in China and the RCEP agreement needs to contain core ILO standards.

“Workers are struggling and what they need is a trade agreement that will ensure jobs, opportunity and growth – instead they’re getting RCEP, which has no guarantee of benefit to workers and is estimated to change Australian GDP by 0 per cent by 2030.

Media contact: Isabella Tilley 0414 894 040