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Wages need to rise along with guaranteed skills and training for workers in Australia to expand migration numbers

The ACTU makes expansion of skilled migration conditional on structural changes to deliver wage growth across the economy, investment in skills and training for local workers and reforms in the visa system in a paper on migration and skills released this morning.

The paper makes support for expanding the yearly permanent migration program to 200,000 places conditional on delivery of these reforms.

In the report: *'Skilling the Nation: Addressing Australia's skills and migration needs now and into the future'* the ACTU sets out 18 recommendations for changes to the skills and migration systems. These include:

- Structural changes in the economy to deliver wage growth
- Establishing Jobs and Skills Australia to repair our broken skills system, independently verifies skill shortages and ensures that skilled permanent migration complements, rather than undermines, these arrangements.
- Abolishing visa conditions that tie workers to a single employer
- Replacing single-employer sponsorships with industry-wide arrangements to address independently verified skill shortages
- Providing a clear, accessible, affordable and self-nominated pathway to permanency for all visas
- Lifting the long-term freeze on the salary floor for temporary skilled migrant workers in line with Average Full Time Weekly Earnings
- Reinvigorate TAFE and guarantee a minimum of 70 per cent public VET funding for TAFE
- A Commonwealth funded 50 per cent wage subsidy for employed apprentices, with 25 per cent of the subsidy to go to the apprentice as a retention bonus

Quotes attributable to ACTU President Michele O'Neil:

"Our migration and skills systems are broken. This has resulted in the mass exploitation of temporary migrant workers and the neglect and decay of our skills training system.

"This paper lays out a comprehensive plan to fix the migration and skills systems, focussed on lifting wages, providing secure jobs and ending exploitation in the visa system and prioritising permanent migration, while properly funding skills training so we can fill genuine skill gaps with skilled local workers.

"The union movement sees an urgent need to lift wages. Too often employers claim a skills shortage when in reality there is a shortage of jobs with good wages and conditions. We support a visa system which prioritises permanent migration and support expanding the permanent migration intake, but that decision must be in concert with systemic changes to undo the decade of low wage growth, exploitation and neglect under the former Government.

"The current system gives individual employers complete control over the visa status of workers, a power imbalance that we know routinely leads to exploitation and abuse. This must end. Fundamental to ending these exploitative arrangements is ensuring that all visas include the option to obtain permanent residency and the ability for workers to move between employers.

"The neglect of TAFE and skills training under the previous Government has left the system in desperate need of reform and adequate funding. We need a system which looks first to fill skill gaps with locally trained workers, rather than allowing the mass exploitation of vulnerable temporary migrant workers.

"The VET system must meaningfully engage with industry - employers and workers- to ensure that the system is meeting the needs of industry and preparing a workforce which can confront decarbonisation, ongoing pandemic management and recovery, and expanding the care sector to meet the needs of an ageing population, among other challenges."

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