

Social Wage and Social Inclusion

Introduction

1. Australia must face up to the challenge of inequality and the pressures on working people due to a decade of wage stagnation and post-pandemic inflation. It is more important than ever for the Government ensure we have a strong social safety net to underpin the living standards of all Australians.
2. Public goods and services, such as universal healthcare, superannuation and public education, all form part of the social wage – that is, they are paid for by workers through income taxation and redistribution. Therefore, working people have a right to decide how their wages should best be distributed to ensure fairness and a good standard of living for all Australians.
3. The Australian union movement was instrumental in introducing key social reforms, such as Medicare and compulsory superannuation, which was paid for through the deferral of wage increases as part of a social compact to protect and provide for all Australians. Australian unions will always defend these reforms that have made our country fairer and advocate for improvements where needed to achieve a better and more equal country.
4. Congress recognises that all Australians must have access to a decent welfare safety net, affordable services, and equal opportunity to be included in society and to participate in the labour market through access to decent work.

Workforce participation

5. Full employment is the foundation of improving workers' living standards and ensuring workers participation in the workforce and in society, built on job security, strong wages growth, certainty in rostering, and flexibility to manage work-life balance.
6. Congress affirms that government should prioritise full employment through active and coordinated policy to make sure every worker who is willing to work has the best chance to join the workforce and engage in meaningful work.
7. For too long vague statistical measures like the NAIRU have been used by conservative governments to justify an unnecessarily high unemployment rate and to deprive workers of good wages and secure jobs, undermining their ability to participate in the workforce and in social life. Congress agrees this is unacceptable and that government policy should be used to keep the unemployment rate low and maximise workforce participation.

Unemployment and working age payments

8. Congress welcomes the Labor Government's acceptance of the 56 recommendations from the Robodebt Royal Commission and calls for the full implementation of the recommendations to ensure this tragedy can never occur again. Congress welcomes the announcement of additional Centrelink staff and ensuring frontline staff are consulted about program changes. Alongside the deliberate Robodebt strategy of the Coalition Government, systemic issues are shifting working Australians to disengage with the social security system designed to support those on low incomes as well as those who are not working.
9. Congress affirms the mandatory welfare quarantine measures, such as the Basic's Welfare Card, Smart Card and the Cashless Welfare Card are discriminatory and punitive and have not led to better outcomes for welfare recipients and calls for the full abolition of these measures. Congress is of the view that the Cashless Welfare Card has been implemented is a fundamentally racist program which was first tested on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and has been primarily targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

10. Despite the rising cost of basic goods and services, social security payments have not increased in real terms in two decades. The temporary increase brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic, which represented a long-overdue acknowledgement that the old rate was unliveable, was sadly short lived. Currently, the JobSeeker Payment is just 42% of the minimum wage - well below the poverty line.
11. Despite the announcement in the 2023 Federal Budget that payments will increase by \$20 a week and Commonwealth Rent Assistance would be increased by 15%, the increases are not sufficient to prevent the widespread financial distress faced by Australians receiving working-age income support payments, particularly in the face of rising prices and rent.
12. Much greater increases are needed to ensure people receiving income support payments can live in dignity. JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Austudy, Abstudy, Special Benefit and Parenting Payment should all be increased to at least the poverty line, up from the current rate of \$54 a day. Commonwealth Rent Assistance must also be increased to reflect rising rents: the maximum threshold should be raised by 50%, which would double the payment received, and the design, eligibility, rate and indexation settings should be reviewed to reduce rental stress.
13. A \$55 a week disability and illness supplement should be established to meet the additional costs faced by people with a disability or chronic illness, and a single parent supplement should be established to recognise the costs of single parenthood, to increase as children get older to reflect that the costs of supporting children increase as they age.
14. Indexation rates for all social security payments should be aligned with wages and price increases, and indexed at least twice per year, so that the widening gap between pensions and allowances may be closed.
15. Moreover, the system for claiming benefits is overly complex, with taper rates that do not provide adequate or sufficient incentive to find and keep work.
16. Incentives should be geared towards placing jobseekers into long term, secure employment rather than churning them through multiple casual engagements.
17. Congress affirms we need jobs we can count on, and we also need to ensure that nobody is left behind and struggling to survive due to insecure work arrangements.
18. While full employment is a goal Congress commits to realising, in the interim Congress affirms Australia's social security system must be designed in a way that recognises the current reality that 40% of workers are in insecure work and may need income support.

Unpaid work for the unemployed

19. Congress condemns unpaid work programs and congratulates the Labor Government for scrapping the exploitative Community Development Programme and the PaTH (Prepare, Trial, Hire) youth skills training program.
20. Forcing the unemployed to undertake unpaid work is exploitative, distorts the labour market by displacing actual paid jobs, and there is no evidence that it leads to ongoing employment. Moreover, it restricts jobseekers from attending other job search activities such as interviews or training.
21. Where jobseekers are performing productive work for an enterprise, Congress affirms that the worker must be paid at least the minimum wage for their work. Congress particularly condemns the practice of jobseekers undertaking unpaid work placements.

Unpaid work placements

22. Congress affirms that all work should be paid and opposes mandatory unpaid practical experience placements as part of obtaining a qualification, recognising it is a barrier to people completing those courses.

Community services

23. All Australians deserve to have access to high quality social and community services, aged care, early childhood education and care (ECEC), and health services in their local community, and the workforces providing these services must be properly valued and remunerated, with secure employment, fair pay, and safe and decent working conditions.
24. Congress congratulates union members in the social and community services sector who fought for and won an historic equal pay case – increasing award minimum wages for hundreds of thousands of workers in Australia. However, despite this progress, Congress notes that the care and community sectors continue to be underrecognized, undervalued and underpaid. Australian unions remain committed to advocating for equal pay for those workers, and Congress pledges support for workers who seek to close the gender pay gap and campaign for better wages and conditions and job security in the community services, aged care, ECEC and health services sectors.
25. Australia is faced with a critical shortage of workers in health care, aged care, disability support, social and community services and other caring professions. Congress resolves to campaign on the effects that low wages and poor conditions have on the care industries.. Congress calls on the Government to better fund these sectors to create secure, well-paid jobs, support portable training and entitlements to increase workforce retention, and to provide more incentives for students to follow career paths in these professions, including ending unpaid work placements for students studying community sector degrees.
26. Congress acknowledges that job security and quality service provision go hand in hand in the funding of community services. Congress therefore advocates for government funding of the community services sector that provides stability of funding, fosters collaboration rather than competition between providers and ensures a fair playing field between smaller local and specialist providers and larger generalist providers.

Women workers

27. Congress notes women workers experience a gender pay gap, gender retirement gap and there are a rising number of women, particularly older women, in insecure housing and experiencing homelessness.
28. Women workers face a number of challenges to participating in the roles and number of hours they would like to work while also being required to balance work/caring responsibilities. Many women are experiencing a penalty to wages/retirement savings because of time out of paid work and their need to work part-time or casually.
29. Congress affirms the need to take active steps to close the gender pay gap and gender retirement gap, and for the union movement to fight discrimination faced by women at work.

Young workers

30. Congress recognises the unique circumstances of many young workers, who are often engaged in formal education and training alongside their employment.
31. To ensure an appropriate balance, Congress advocates for the inclusion of study leave and flexible work arrangements that would make it easier for young workers to work and study at the same time.
32. Congress notes that young workers face discrimination which affects their pay and conditions, including shorter minimum engagement periods in some awards; lower pay rates than adults performing the same work; and, for workers under 18 doing less than 30 hours of paid employment per week, no employer contributions to superannuation. These legislative clauses and practices are unfair and discriminatory, and Congress calls on Government to redress this.

Older workers

33. As the Australian population ages, it is expected that Australians will live longer and retire later. In this context, paid employment can be an important source of social inclusion for older workers.
34. At the same time, older Australians must be given a genuine choice of when and whether to retire, and they should be given the option to retire in dignity or be given access to flexible working arrangements if they are no longer capable of working in a full-time capacity.
35. Congress notes the decision by the previous Labor government to lift the pension and superannuation eligibility age, which has been continued and extended by subsequent Coalition Governments. This has created real inequality, particularly for blue collar workers, manual workers, and workers with physically demanding jobs who are forced to continue working past 65. Congress calls on the Government to make provision for reducing the aged pension eligibility age to the previous standard.

Migrant workers

36. Congress recognises that migrant workers, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, face particular challenges in the community and in workplaces.
37. Congress affirms that every worker, no matter where they have come from or what languages they speak, must be treated with fairness, dignity and respect inside and outside the workplace.
38. Congress notes that migrant workers are at particular risk of wage theft, harassment, bullying, discrimination and unsafe practices at work.
39. Congress affirms that the union movement gains strength through diversity and encourages affiliates to organise migrant workers and ensure workplace materials and workplace rights education is accessible to those who speak languages other than English.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and asexual (LGBTQIA+) workers

40. Congress notes that LGBTQIA+ workers face particular challenges in the labour market and during employment. LGBTQIA+ workers are at greater risk of bullying, discrimination and harassment at work, and these issues should be addressed through both legislative and cultural change.
41. Congress affirms that LGBTQIA+ workers should have access to the same rights and protections as all other workers, and that sexual orientation is rightly classed as a Protection, meaning that employers are in breach of the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth) if they discriminate against workers based on sexual orientation.
42. Congress acknowledges the unique employment barriers and discrimination that transgender and gender diverse workers face, and that financial and employment security is a substantial barrier preventing transgender and gender diverse workers to transition, socially, medically and/or legally. Noting that non- gender affirmation in the workplace is overt discrimination, Congress supports more inclusive workplace legislation and EBA clauses to address and support transgender and gender diverse employees.
43. Congress notes the successful union campaign for marriage equality and acknowledges that the fight is not over. Congress encourages affiliates to review their enterprise bargaining agreement processes to be inclusive of rainbow families by removing and reviewing existing gendered language on parental and carers leave clauses, and to fight for adoption and surrogate leave clauses.
44. Congress acknowledges that not all LGBTQIA+ workers have the same basic protections and rights and notes its disappointment at the current state of religious exemption legislation. There are currently over 200,000 jobs in Australia where a LGBTQIA+ worker can legally be fired from if they come out. LGBTQIA+ workers may come out requesting union won carers, compassionate and/or bereavement

leave to face legal termination of employment. Congress calls for the commitment to scrap these discriminatory laws.

45. Congress supports affiliates in creating a LGBTIQ+ liaisons organisers portfolio, to support the unique challenges LGBTIQ+ workers face within the workplace, and to promote union strength and growth through diversity inclusion.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers

46. Congress commends the Albanese Government for increased funding and prioritising 'Closing the Gap' targets in vital community, health, legal and housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Without these services, it is more difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have a quality life. We encourage the government to continue their engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to create sustainable economic and employment growth, especially in remote and vulnerable communities.
47. Congress commits to continue the fight for 'same job same pay' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers. When employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are paid less and are more likely to be in insecure work, employed casual or part-time, underpaid or in voluntary work. The 2021 ABS data showed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples performed unpaid or voluntary work;
 - a. 59.9% in domestic work
 - b. 30.5% in childcare work
 - c. 14% caring for people with a disability, heart condition or required assistance due to age.
 - d. 10.6% Voluntary work with an organisation or group
48. Congress commits to lowering the race wage gap of 33% for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander workers. With the median weekly wage at \$540 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, compared to the median weekly wage of other workers at \$805.

Culturally and racially diverse workers

49. Congress recognises that culturally and racially diverse workers particularly workers of colour, whether born in this country or overseas, experience particular barriers in the community and in their workplaces.
50. Congress affirms that every worker, no matter whether they are born in this country or have come from overseas, no matter what language they speak or what their cultural background or religion must be treated with fairness, dignity and respect inside and outside the workplace.
51. Congress notes that culturally and racially diverse workers are at particular risk of unconscious bias, racism, discrimination, bullying, harassment and unsafe practices in the workplace.
52. Congress affirms that the union movement gains strength through diversity and inclusion and encourages affiliates to organise culturally and racially diverse workers to ensure workplaces and union workplace structures reflect the diversity of the Australian community and better support culturally and racially diverse workers.