

Australian businesses call for return of overseas workers and students to overcome hospitality ‘labour shortages’

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26 November 2021

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced Monday that fully-vaccinated eligible visa holders, including international students, skilled workers, and working holiday makers will be allowed to enter the country, without an exemption, from December 1.

Quarantine requirements will be left up to the states. Students and workers bound for New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory will not be required to quarantine at all upon arrival.

Morrison made clear the motivation behind the reopening, saying it “will further cement our economic recovery, providing the valuable workers our economy needs and supporting our important education sector.”

The move comes partly in response to a clamour from business lobbyists for the resumption of international travel to ensure the return of cheap immigrant labour as Labor and Liberal-National state governments across Australia rapidly lift all remaining COVID-19 restrictions in the lead-up to Christmas.

In NSW and Victoria, despite ongoing COVID-19 outbreaks, virtually all measures to contain the spread of the virus have been ended. Restaurants, pubs, cinemas, stadiums, and other high-risk public venues have reopened, but businesses are lamenting a supposed “labour shortage.”

According to the *Australian*, job vacancies in the hospitality sector are set to top 100,000 this month, with the most sought-after applicants being baristas (20,713), wait staff (14,737), bartenders (13,758) and chefs (11,028).

Restaurants and Catering Australia Chief Executive Officer Wes Lambert claimed in October, evidently in horror, that “numerous CBD establishments” were offering \$40 per hour for barista positions and up to \$50 per hour for wait staff to lure workers into jobs.

While some high-end restaurants in Sydney and Melbourne—among the least affordable cities in the world—may offer higher wages in the short-term, to casual workers without any guaranteed hours or future

employment, business is not prepared to accept this as the norm in an industry where workers are typically paid half or less of the figures Lambert cites.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Accommodation and Food Services workers earn an average of \$650 per week, the lowest median wages in the country.

The claim that there is a “labour shortage” flies in the face of reality. The latest Roy Morgan employment data reported that Australia had an unemployment rate of 9.2 percent and an underemployment rate of 8.6 percent. In other words, roughly 1.32 million people were not working and 1.23 million were working fewer hours than they wished.

What businesses really mean by “labour shortage” is a lack of workers prepared to work for poverty-level wages. This is what is behind the demands to bring international students and backpackers back into the country, to turn back on the tap of cheap labour.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Chief Executive Andrew McKellar declared earlier this month: “To get our economy back up to speed, we’re going to have to move beyond quarantine requirements for all fully vaccinated international arrivals... Fully vaccinated skilled migrants, working holidaymakers and international students must be allowed into the country as soon as possible to fill skills gaps.”

McKellar’s comments give expression to ruling-class demands for the reopening of international borders, which is critical to the resumption of profit-making and the super-exploitation of immigrant workers.

Hospitality workers have been among the hardest hit by the slashing of jobs and hours during the pandemic. The sector is dominated by low wages and high levels of casualisation and relies heavily on international workers and students.

According to a report released by Monash University in January, “Migration and COVID-19,” the food and accommodation industries employed approximately one

million workers in June 2019. The report revealed that across the hospitality sector, 79 percent of all workers were in casual employment.

In 2019, skilled migrants, international students and working holidaymakers (WHM) “were an essential part of the hospitality sector.” Around half of all workers in the restaurant and cafe industry and the accommodation sector were WHMs and 12 percent were temporary migrants.

The report continued: “For international students, hospitality work is the most common form of employment, on a par with cleaning, with significant numbers working in food processing. While those on WHM visas are most often working in agriculture, hospitality related occupations are also a common place of work.”

In one indication of the widespread and highly exploitative practices in the hospitality sector, a 2018 Fair Work Office (FWO) audit covering Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane showed “72 percent of businesses in the hospitality industry had breached workplace laws, most commonly underpayment of wages, and failure to provide pay slips.”

A 2018 publication in the *Economic and Industrial Democracy* journal featured a survey of 1,433 international student visa holders, which showed that 100 percent of those working part time as wait staff and retail shop assistants were paid less than the minimum wage.

According to Austrade, there were 552,491 international students in Australia in August 2021, 149,100 fewer than in 2019. This sharp reduction is due in large part to the callous attitude of the federal government toward international students and other temporary visa holders during the pandemic.

Morrison said in April 2020: “As much as it’s lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times, at times like this, if you are a visitor in this country, it is time... to make your way home.”

With businesses closed during lockdowns, these “visitors” were not needed as a cheap source of labour and they were driven out by the refusal of the government to provide them even the meagre welfare and wage subsidies offered to Australian workers and students.

Regardless of citizenship, casual workers were excluded from JobKeeper subsidies if they had not been in the same job for 12 months. In the hospitality sector, with its high levels of turnover, many students and young people were not eligible.

As co-architects of the JobKeeper scheme, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) played a key role in the slashing of jobs across the hospitality industry during lockdowns.

Hospo Voice, the hospitality section of the United Workers Union, published a statement on November 15

entitled “5 Ways To Make The Most Of The Hospo Labour Shortage.” The union implores workers to use their “position of power” to negotiate with bosses to “get the pay you deserve, get job security and get a safer workplace.” Should these appeals to management fail, the statement suggests workers write a negative review of their employer on the union’s “Fair Plate” website and “get a better job.”

The statement is a declaration that the union, which has hundreds of millions of dollars in assets, will not wage any fight against low pay, rampant casualisation and wage theft throughout the industry. In addition to placing the onus of seeking to improve conditions on atomised, individual workers, this is a pledge to management that the UWU and its counterparts will ensure that the poverty-level wages and miserable conditions in the sector remain.

Decent pay and conditions for hospitality workers, regardless of nationality and ethnicity, cannot be won through the unions, which are a corporatised police force of company managements. Instead, workers should fight to build rank-and-file committees, unified across workplaces, completely independent of the unions.

Through these committees, workers must oppose the homicidal ruling class policy of forcing the population to “live with” the deadly virus. This should include a struggle for scientifically-based travel restrictions, a medically-grounded quarantine program for all necessary international arrivals, aimed at preventing transmission, and for lockdowns and other safety measures aimed at eliminating COVID.

This requires a complete rejection of the attempts by the Labor Party and the unions to pit Australian-born workers against their “foreign” counterparts. The unending assault on jobs, wages and conditions is not caused by immigration. Instead, it is the outcome of continuous sell-outs imposed by the unions, alongside Labor, both of which are committed to boosting profits at the expense of the pay and even the lives of workers.

The fight for the social rights of ordinary people, including to health and safety, requires the unity of the working class, in Australia and internationally, on the basis of a socialist program aimed at ending the pandemic and guaranteeing full-time, permanent jobs with decent wages to all.



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