

Australian retail lobby calls for working age to be lowered to 13

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Key Australian business leaders want the federal government to reduce the national minimum working age to 13.

The Australian Retailers Association (ARA) submitted the proposal to the Labor government's Jobs and Skills Summit. The September 1-2 summit brought together representatives of big business, government and the trade unions to outline a renewed assault on working-class jobs, wages and conditions.

ARA chief executive Paul Zahra told the media ahead of the summit: "An ideal model would be one where we allow 13-to-15-year-olds to work." He claimed that "sensible regulations" could prevent working during school hours "or at times that would impact a young person's education."

Most immediately, the proposal is driven by major workforce shortages caused by every governments' "let it rip" response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with tens of thousands of workers unable to work each day due to infections or Long COVID.

Having demanded that workers be pushed back into unsafe workplaces, big business is seeking to utilise the crisis it has created to wind back working conditions to the 19th century.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the retail industry is currently short around 40,000 workers. Zahra told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio: "We're at crisis point when it comes to labour shortages."

Reducing the official working age would enable big business to lay its hands on the untapped labour of an estimated 200,000 teenagers between 13 and 15. Restaurant and Catering Industry Association head Belinda Clarke was also enthusiastic about the proposal. "We need to start looking to sensible and practical solutions to fix the labour shortage," she said.

Amid spiralling inflation and the ongoing pandemic, the ruling class is intent on destroying the hard-won rights gained by workers over a whole historical period, including restrictions on child labour.

The call to reintroduce child labour is a stark exposure of the broader agenda behind the Jobs and Skills Summit. The Albanese government's stated aim for the summit was to boost "productivity," a code word for stepped-up exploitation of workers and greater corporate profits.

The ARA's proposal sparked outrage on social media, testifying to the broad opposition among workers and youth to the bipartisan onslaught against their living conditions.

Comments on Twitter included the following: "It's 2022 and Australia's peak retail body is calling for greater use of child labour," "How 19th century of them!" "They should try paying adults better wages instead of exploiting children," "I can't believe this! Those children should stay at the schools and libraries."

Businesses typically place teenage workers in low-paid, menial and unskilled positions. At present, there are few legal restrictions in Australia preventing children from working.

The states of New South Wales and South Australia have no minimum age for part-time work, but have some restrictions on the type of work and hours. In Victoria and Western Australia, the minimum age for part-time or casual work is 15, with certain exceptions. Queensland teenagers can start working part-time from the age of 13, but need parental consent if aged under 16.

The ARA proposal was not taken up at the summit, at least in public. Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles suggested that targeting older workers and pensioners instead was a better solution to labour shortages.

Nevertheless, the proposal should be viewed as a warning to the working class of the intensified assault on conditions that the corporate elite is demanding. Employment prospects for young teenagers are predominantly casualised positions in the ruthless and insecure “gig economy.” Young workers receive poverty-level wages, in industries where entitlements and conditions have been severely eroded for years.

In 2020, tens of thousands of young part-time workers saw their wages and penalty rates slashed by fast food chains including McDonald’s, in collaboration with the Fair Work Commission and the trade unions. The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA), the largest union in the retail sector, supported the wage-cutting deal, only the latest in a long series of betrayals by the unions of some of the lowest-paid workers in the country.

For decades, the unions have facilitated the destruction of full-time employment, resulting in the precarious, temporary nature of employment facing young workers. Central to the discussion at the Jobs and Skills Summit was how Labor and the unions will impose the further industrial relations restructuring demanded by the corporate and financial elite.

This process began under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1996, which collaborated with the unions to smash up workers’ jobs and conditions in the quest to make Australian capitalism globally “competitive.” The pro-market restructuring was enforced via the Price and Income Accords and the enterprise bargaining system, which outlaws strikes except during union-controlled bargaining periods.

The pandemic has been consciously utilised by employers and governments, assisted by the unions, to intensify the attack on workers’ conditions. As with all sections of the working class, younger workers are also exposed every day to the possibility of infection with a potentially deadly virus, due to the homicidal “live with the virus” policies adopted by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.

Young people confront a future of heightened exploitation and social misery under capitalism. Labor and the unions have no intention of fulfilling their bogus election promises of a “better future,” but are demanding workers make “sacrifices” for the sake of business profits.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is alone in fighting to turn young people to the working class as the only social force capable of ending the assault on living standards under capitalism. The mounting hostility among workers, across different industries and around the world, must be mobilised in a revolutionary movement against the profit system itself.

Students and young workers who oppose the drive toward hyper-exploitation should contact the IYSSE, and take up the fight for a socialist future, one based on the needs of society, not the profit interests of a super-rich minority.



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