Full-time employment plummets in Australia

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7 January 2026

Across Australia, 56,500 full-time jobs were destroyed between October and November last year, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). At the same time, part-time and casual employment increased by 35,200 to 4,578,900 people, 31.2 percent of the total workforce.

The decline in full-time employment is part of a long-term trend: In 1978, part-time employment accounted for just 14.9 percent of the workforce, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

The ABS showed that nominal hourly earnings went up $2.90, or 7.3 percent, to $42.90 per hour in the year to August 2025. But median weekly earnings increased by only $26, or 1.9 percent, to $1,425.

Over the same period, the official inflation rate—itself a substantial understatement of the real rise in the cost of living—was 3.2 percent, meaning the average worker was hit with a significant pay cut in real terms.

The official seasonally adjusted unemployment rate remained at 4.3 percent in November. After reaching a long-term low of 3.5 percent in October 2022, the unemployment rate has risen steadily and has not dropped below 4.3 percent in six months.

Although the official unemployment rate now appears "stable," the total number of employed workers fell by 21,300 in November, the largest single-month decline since February. The rate did not change partly due to "workforce participation" falling by 23,500 people to 66.7 percent, the lowest since March last year. ABS employment and unemployment estimates are deceptive, because its "labour force" definition counts "employed" workers as those working merely an hour a week and "unemployed" workers as only those actively applying for jobs in the four weeks prior to data collection.

Young workers aged 15–24 are among the hardest hit in terms of unemployment. Youth unemployment jumped from 9.7 percent in October to 10.2 percent in November, more than double the overall rate.

Market research firm Roy Morgan calculates real unemployment at 10.7 percent, meaning 1.7 million workers are out of a job, 165,000 more than a year earlier. At the same time, underemployment increased by 266,000 workers to 1.6 million, or 10.2 percent of the workforce.

That is, some 3.3 million people, or 20.9 percent of the workforce, are either out of work or do not have enough work to get by, 431,000 more than a year ago.

The full-time job losses in November notably impacted 40,500 men and 16,000 women. This significant disparity is partly explained by recent major job losses in mining and other male-dominated heavy industries, including:

• In Central Queensland's coal-rich Bowen Basin, cuts to over 1,000 mining jobs were announced in September, with BHP slashing around 750 jobs and Anglo American more than 200 jobs in the region. The Mining and Energy Union (MEU) sought to head off members' opposition, claiming the cuts would primarily affect "head office" rather than miners. In addition, 170 jobs were eliminated by the closing of QCoal's Cook Colliery underground mine this month.

• BHP also announced in October that it would "wind down" production at its Yandi iron-ore mine, in the Pilbara region of Western Australia (WA), by mid-2026. At the time of the announcement, the mine employed some 750 workers and contractors, of which only around 100 would be retained to oversee the site's "care and maintenance." But the Western Mine Workers Alliance, a partnership of the MEU and the Australian Workers Union (AWU), downplayed the announcement, claiming only 100–150 jobs were actually being destroyed, because the other 500 workers would either be redeployed or take redundancy packages.

• The same day as the Yandi announcement, 100

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workers at Worsley Alumina's Collie refinery in southwest WA were told they would be made redundant.

• The Alcoa alumina refinery at Kwinana, south of WA capital Perth, finalised its permanent shutdown in October, eliminating the last 220 jobs. Since the closure was announced in early 2024, more than 700 direct jobs have been cut, as well as 300 contractor positions. The AWU accepted the shutdown as unavoidable from day one, suppressing any struggle against the destruction of jobs and overseeing an "orderly closure" on behalf of management.

• Since February 2025, more than 400 workers at the Tahmoor colliery, just south of Sydney, New South Wales (NSW), have been stood down on reduced pay, due to the ongoing financial crisis of owner Sanjeev Gupta. In early November, labour-hire contractor RStar, which employed some 250 workers at the facility, announced that they would be stood down entirely, as the mine's owners had stopped paying their bills.

Substantial job cuts have also been announced by the country's major banks:

• ANZ announced in September it would eliminate 3,500 staff and 1,000 contractors over the following 12 months.

• Westpac unveiled plans in May to cull up to 1,700 jobs, 5 percent of its full-time workforce. In September, 200 teller jobs were set to be eliminated as part of Westpac's "digital-first strategy." The Finance Sector Union has reported that 134 tellers were axed in October, which it said was "deeply disappointing."

• In June, the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) sacked more than 300 Australian-based staff and outsourced 100 jobs to India. CBA was also the first employer in the country to openly announce the replacement of workers by artificial intelligence (AI), stating in July that it would cut 45 jobs after introducing an AI-powered "voice-bot." The bank was forced to retract the announcement the following month, facing anger from workers and a hearing in the Fair Work Commission.

CBA's tactical misstep aside, the use of AI to slash jobs on a mass scale is very much on the agenda of the Australian ruling class.

On December 2, the Labor government unfurled its "National AI Plan," backed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), which issued a same-day media release titled "AI Plan puts workers at the centre." The ACTU claimed that, under Labor's plan, workers' interests and jobs can be defended through "meaningful consultation." This is nothing more than a pledge by the top union body to work closely with corporate executives on the wholesale destruction of jobs.

Two weeks later, Labor Treasurer Jim Chalmers announced in his mid-year budget update a plan to "save" $6.8 billion over four years by gutting the public service. He made clear that job cuts are inevitable and pledged to "unlock the full potential of AI in public service delivery."

The NSW Labor government, whose public sector is the country's largest workforce with more than 450,000 workers, started a series of mass job cuts in August, including more than 1,250 positions at Transport for NSW and around 300 at WaterNSW.

Along with other state Labor governments around the country, NSW Labor has imposed successive real wage cuts on public sector workers, including in transport, health and education, spearheading the assault on working-class living standards.

In both the public and private sectors, the trade unions have played a crucial role in enforcing this onslaught, ramming through real-wage slashing enterprise agreements on behalf of governments and management, and blocking any struggle by workers to defend their jobs and conditions.

Workers must take matters into their own hands and build rank-and-file committees, democratically run by workers and independent of the union bureaucracies. Through such committees, workers can break union-imposed isolation and unite their struggles with workers across industries and borders, mobilising the real power of the working class.

To defend jobs, wages and conditions, what is required is not just an industrial struggle but a political one, against the capitalist system and all of its organs, including Labor and the trade unions.

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