

Submission Number: 8
Date Received: 16/4/2010



16 April 2010

The Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Employment and Workplace Relations
Department of House of Representatives

Dear Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry into regional skills relocation by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations.

The ACTU strongly supports the idea of giving unemployed people the opportunity and incentive to relocate voluntarily to regional areas with genuine skill shortages. To do this properly, it is important to get the right relocation incentives and support structures in place. This should include measures such as travel assistance, and assistance with finding affordable housing and child care – remembering that the unemployed may be young, single people in some cases, but they can also be mothers and fathers with families to support. These measures need to be backed by the availability of ongoing mentoring and support services to help with adjustment difficulties that might arise for people living in a new regional area. For example, for some people who relocate it may be the first time they have lived away from home.

A fundamental part of any relocation scheme must be the provision of appropriate training opportunities for those who wish to relocate. Individuals who are matched with available jobs should have their skills assessed, have access to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) where appropriate, and have a structured training plan established in consultation with their new employer. Where required, this should include access to language, literacy and numeracy training, as well as employability skills, and the opportunity to work towards a nationally recognised qualification in their new field of employment.

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While the ACTU does support the idea of regional skills relocation, we do emphasise, however, that even in regional areas where there are reported skill shortages, unemployment, and youth unemployment in particular, is alarmingly high in many cases. Underemployment is also an issue. Policy measures, therefore, should be directed at providing employment and training opportunities for those people who already live in these regional areas. In this respect, it is important to assess whether reported skill shortages are in fact a genuine shortage of the skill required or if they are better characterised as simply employer recruitment problems related to inadequate wages and conditions being offered.

The ACTU submits that more can be done in regional areas, and more widely, to improve the workforce participation of groups who are disadvantaged or under-represented at present. This includes women, indigenous people, older workers, and school leavers. Attention should also be directed to improving and making better use of the skills of existing workers. The ACTU has recently addressed these issues at greater length in its submission to the National Resources Sector Employment Taskforce and I attach a copy of that submission for the information of the Committee.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,

Sharan Burrows
ACTU President