



**Select Committee on COVID-19
inquiry into the Australian
Government's response to the
COVID-19 pandemic**
May 2020 Submission



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Executive Summary

The United Workers Union (UWU) represents 150,000 essential workers on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis. UWU is a new union created by workers to rebuild the power of working people and create transformative change for the many, not the few. Bringing together more than 45 industries, the work of our members spans the community and essential supply chains. Without us, everything stops.

Our members are proud of the work they do. Paramedics and healthcare members work around the clock saving lives; farm workers pick the fruit and vegetables we all eat; warehouse workers; and food process workers ensure stores have the goods they need; early childhood educators care for our children; cleaners keep our hospitals and schools safe; and aged care workers ensure the elderly live with dignity.

While this Government has recently deemed this work *essential*, our members have long been undervalued and subjected to precarious working arrangements, low pay and disrespect. *For our members and working people around the country, the status quo has always been unequal; this crisis has revealed it is also untenable.*

UWU is committed to working with any Government that will take the steps necessary to ensure we truly are "in this together" by guaranteeing social and economic security for all workers. We must take bold action to ensure vulnerable communities, working people and younger generations do not unduly shoulder the burden of this crisis.

In the context of this evolving health and economic emergency, UWU welcomes the opportunity to put forward recommendations that can advance a progressive alternative vision that ensures no-one is left behind as we work to rebuild our economy for everyone.



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Summary of Recommendations

1. Provision of basic income payment of \$750 per week directly payable to all workers financially impacted by COVID-19, including casuals and visa holders.
2. Maintain the current rate of JobSeeker at \$550 per week, extend to all unemployed workers and disability support pension recipients, and permanently abolish mutual obligations.
3. Visa amnesty for migrant workers and universal healthcare for everyone currently in Australia, including visa holders and undocumented workers.
4. Universal sick leave that encompasses 20 days paid pandemic leave for all workers, irrespective of how they are classified. This specifically includes casual workers.
5. Ensure workers and their unions play an active role in developing COVID-19 specific OHS training and practice, with access to necessary PPE.
6. Bring public services back into public hands.
7. Invest in renewable energy generation and export infrastructure to rebuild the economy and create secure union jobs for the future.



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Introduction

It is the view of UWU that the COVID-19 crisis has revealed and exacerbated inequalities that have long persisted in our communities and workplaces. Despite claims to the contrary, pandemics and health crises *do* discriminate and entrench existing structures of power and privilege that existed before the crisis. Vulnerable members of our communities and workplaces have been the hardest hit. This includes low paid and precarious workers, young people, temporary visa holders and undocumented workers, and unemployed workers.

Decades of neoliberal economic restructuring have increased inequality, removed key workplace protections, eroded workers' bargaining power, and led to a dramatic rise in the incidence of precarious and insecure work, underemployment, wage theft, and wage stagnation. The COVID-19 crisis has shown once again that workers need to redesign our industrial relations system to make it fit for purpose and ensure it works for *all* workers.

The economic impact of COVID-19 will reverberate through our country for years to come. If we are to rebuild and strengthen our economy rather than simply respond to symptoms as they arise, we must acknowledge the structural forces that have weakened our collective security. This includes widespread casualisation and precarity, punitive treatment of unemployed workers, a broken visa system and exploitation of migrant workers, diminishing support for young people, and no action on the climate crisis.



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Recommendations

1. Provision of basic income payment of \$750 per week directly payable to all workers financially impacted by COVID-19, including casuals and visa holders.

A basic income is a guaranteed periodic cash payment delivered on an individual basis. The payment is unconditional, meaning the recipient is not required to work or demonstrate willingness to work, nor is the payment means tested. UWU recommends the basic income be directly payable to those financially impacted by COVID-19, regardless of whether they were in paid employment or not before the outbreak, until the end of 2020, at which time the situation can be reassessed and built upon. Workers who have not been impacted financially, such as those who can work, can work from home without loss of pay, or those able to receive special ongoing leave provisions from their employer, would be exempt from receiving the basic income as they have not been impacted financially.

A basic income is not a wage but a social dividend on our collective wealth. During a time of crisis and insecurity, basic security is a natural public good. Economic security will be an essential precondition of banding together to rebuild our economy in the recovery post-COVID-19. A high number of workers and young people are currently negotiating to defer their rental and mortgage payments, resulting in deferred arrears and debt. Extension of the income guarantee until at least the end of 2020 will be necessary in recovering from these, and other, deferred payment arrears.

JobKeeper shortfalls are features, not bugs.

The JobKeeper measure is demonstrably flawed in the following three key areas and as such should be abandoned in favour of a basic income.

1. Issues of eligibility: exclusion of many migrants and casual workers.
2. Issues of implementation: a wage subsidy must flow directly to workers.
3. Erosion of hard-won industrial relations norms.

2. Maintain the current rate of JobSeeker at \$550 per week, extend to all unemployed workers and disability support pension recipients, and abolish mutual obligations.

UWU welcomed the Government's March 22 decision to increase the rate of JobSeeker (formerly Newstart) to \$550 per week. Whilst welcomed, the dramatic increase also signaled the Government's acknowledgement that the previous rate of a mere \$40 per day is unequivocally not enough money to live on. Following this acknowledgment, UWU recommends the current rate be maintained and reviewed at a future date for potential increase to the minimum wage.



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UWU recommends the increased rate of JobSeeker be maintained for three key reasons:

Firstly, UWU understands a 'worker' in the broadest sense to be a member of the working class. A worker's employment status is irrelevant to this class position. As such we extend solidarity to anyone who works to survive, or finds themselves in a compromised position if unable to do so. This includes the long term unemployed and disabled. Public narratives that seek to malign workers based on their employment status are designed to distract attention from the structural causes of unemployment and the current shortage of available employment positions.

Secondly, the distinction between precarious work and unemployment is increasingly ambiguous. Australia has one of the highest rates of casualisation of any OECD country.¹ Further, under-employment currently sits at 8.7% and is rising², meaning there is a desire to work more hours than currently available. As a result many workers supplement poverty wages with Centrelink benefits to get by. For low paid workers, a clear delineation between wages and welfare simply does not exist. For warehouse labour hire workers without job security, unemployment is only a text message away. For farm workers working in piece rate arrangements, unemployment is a moment-to-moment possibility. Across the gig economy and the Arts, misclassified 'independent contractors' further erode any meaningful difference between employed or unemployed.

Thirdly, it is the role of UWU and indeed any union to ensure working people need not fear unemployment. For as long as workers associate job losses with destitution, the quality, safety and meaning of work will experience a race to the bottom. Workers need a *right of exit*, the power to say no to unsafe or dangerously low paid work. Providing a floor for unemployed workers lifts the quality of work for all.

It is further recommended that mutual obligations and other workforce programs administered by Centrelink and private job seeker programs be permanently abolished. Such measures are punitive and serve no constructive benefits. In fact, testimony from unemployment workers speaks to the 'traps' of these measures which actually create barriers to obtaining employment.³

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/australia/employment-outlook-australia-en.pdf>

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-26/underemployment-on-the-rise-and-may-get-worse/12003092>

³ Reported 20 March 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/20/centrelink-continues-to-chase-welfare-clients-for-robodebts-despite-coronavirus>

3. Visa amnesty for migrant workers and universal healthcare for everyone currently in Australia, including visa holders and undocumented workers.

UWU's approach to issues of migration is grounded in the union's core values, and includes the following guiding principles:

- The promotion of permanent migration as well as strong protections for all temporary migrant workers in Australia;
- A humanitarian approach to migration and asylum, the promotion of decent employment, and equality of treatment for all workers;
- A commitment to freedom of movement, and belief that immigration was, is and always will be a positive aspect of Australian life.

In short, UWU considers justice for migrant workers to be core union business.⁴

There are currently 2.17 million people in Australia on temporary visas.⁵ As many as one million migrant workers have been excluded from any government assistance during this crisis⁶ with many now facing economic stress and hardship. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's comments that struggling international students and migrant workers should simply "go home"⁷ were particularly offensive and belies the fact that the Australian economy relies on migrant workers and an exploitative visa system across many of the essential industries we have collectively relied upon during this crisis, in particular, horticulture, cleaning and security.

UWU recommends the Government immediately provide visa amnesty to all migrant workers currently in the country, and extend access to Medicare to every person in this country. The Government must also cease all visa enforcement and detention actions administered by the Department of Home Affairs.

We need a wage subsidy for every worker. We work hard, we pay taxes, now is the time for all workers to be supported. We need a visa amnesty for undocumented workers. If farm workers are left behind, it will be a risk to public health and food supply. – Yaya, UWU member and farm worker

It's crucial for undocumented workers to be acknowledged. They need the foundations and basic needs that a human being needs, including legal rights to work to be able to support yourself so you can supply food, water and shelter for yourself. Let's be honest, undocumented workers are not receiving any handouts from the Australian Government, but they do need support in the

⁴ For further information see United Workers Union submission to Select Committee on temporary Migration, March 2020.

⁵ <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/davidcoleman/Pages/Coronavirus-and-Temporary-Visa-holders.aspx>

⁶ https://www.futurework.org.au/australians_want_jobkeeper_extended_to_include_all_who_need_it

⁷ Reported 3 April 2020, available at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-03/coronavirus-pm-tells-international-students-time-to-go-to-home/12119568>



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long run for the work they do in horticulture. As the whole world is facing this crisis, the amnesty for our farms workers is one solution. – Dewi, UWU member and migrant worker

4. Universal sick leave that encompasses 20 days paid pandemic leave for all workers.

High rates of casualisation mean an unacceptable number of workers must forego economic security if they fall sick. Whilst this has always been unethical, in the midst of a global pandemic it also presents a serious public health risk.

Australians understand collective responsibility, as demonstrated by our widespread commitment to social distancing measures these past few months. However, for workers living on the poverty line, the economic threat of lost shifts will incentivise too many workers to continue to work when they are sick. This represents a danger to workers themselves, their families, their workplaces and patrons or clients. Workers need the economic security to self-isolate. Without paid universal sick leave and paid pandemic leave too many workers will risk their own health and that of the public's by working when sick and potentially carrying the COVID-19 virus.

Further still, working people need paid pandemic leave to cushion against the many unexpected disruptions to everyday life currently experienced. For instance, working parents may need paid time away from work to care for their children or others during this time. Whatever the reasons, we must ensure that those that *should* stay away from work can afford to do so. As such, UWU recommends the Government amend the National Employment Standards (NES) and state based industrial instruments to provide for universal paid leave on an ongoing basis for all workers.

I am a single mother of three and work as a personal carer which puts me at risk of contracting the virus. I have no sick leave after a recent infection and use my annual leave for Christmas school holidays with my kids. If I get coronavirus, or anyone of my children do, I won't be able to put a roof over my head, pay my bills and feed my family. – Cass

I take care of people with disabilities and who also have additional medical needs. Even with a minor cold or cough I cannot go to work. As I am only part-time I only get an average of five days sick leave per year. After contracting influenza at work from a resident, I had to be absent for 10 days using up all of my personal leave. When I needed an emergency operation to remove my gall bladder I had to use my long service leave. Now facing a pandemic, I do not know what I would do if I got sick again. – Bianka

All of my work is direct contact – delivering personal care, assistance with showering, toileting, feeding etc. which makes social distancing impossible. I have used up all of my personal leave on the usual sickness that comes from my work and from everyday life. I cannot survive not being paid if I get sick during a pandemic. – Jason

5. Ensure workers and their unions play an active role in developing COVID-19 specific OHS training and practice, with access to necessary PPE.

When the pandemic broke, the Government was slow to ensure worker safety and adequate provision of appropriate PPE in addition to establishing proper guidelines and funding in critical sectors such as aged care, disability support and early childhood education and care. Social distancing is impossible in these sectors – for example, when a young child falls over and hurts themselves, educators offer care and comfort. These are also feminised sectors – and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it brutally clear that the work of low paid women is fundamental to our economic and social survival.⁸

Without adequate PPE, testing and proper guidelines, workers face an increased risk of developing COVID-19, and worry about spreading it to their family members and other people.

"The nursing home does not want to impose restrictions of visitors, some visitors refuse to have their temperature checked and they walk all-over the nursing home and nothing is done. One visit per resident is ignored, carers are not well informed or given PPE equipment. It's scary." - Judy, aged care worker

"(We are) putting ourselves in danger going into the clients' homes and doing personal care and taking them shopping with close contact. We haven't been supplied with the proper masks and there is no more sanitizer supplied. We don't have thermometers to do appropriate temperature testing like other industries." – Janette, home care worker

"We need masks and protective clothing and appropriate guidelines for our line of work tailored to the people we are assisting. We risk infection every shift. We risk infecting our clients every shift and then we risk infecting our families and the community when we go home - even if we follow the social distancing rules outside of work, we are still a risk to our families and communities because we are so exposed and unprotected when we are at work." - Disability support worker.⁹

UWU recommends workers and their unions play an active role in developing COVID-19 specific OHS training and practice in addition to the creation of state-reporting mechanisms for non-compliant employers.

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/covid-19-has-laid-bare-how-much-we-value-womens-work-and-how-little-we-pay-for-it-136042>

⁹ Cortis, N. and van Toorn, G. (2020). *The disability workforce and COVID-19: initial experiences of the outbreak*, Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, pg. 6.



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Unionised workplaces are safer workplaces

Early Childhood Educators take safety into their own hands

After the Government failed to act quickly, UWU members collectively developed a six point plan to ensure the safety of children and workers. The plan includes pre-entry screening; adequate PPE, cleaning and staffing; certain hygiene practices; and staggered times for children starting and ending their days of early learning. UWU members organised in their workplaces and demanded that their centres adopt the plan. Several employers committed to implementing the six point plan, including Goodstart, Australia's largest provider of early learning and care. Union members filled the gap that was left by the Australian Government in providing proper guidance on workplace standards in ECEC – by acting collectively workers were able to create safer workplaces.

OHS win at Coles warehouse results in industry wide change

On 27 March 2020, around 250 UWU members walked off the job at a Coles warehouse in Laverton Victoria over safety concerns and the lack of social distancing on the warehouse floor. There wasn't enough hand sanitiser and Coles weren't taking basic measures to stop the virus, like checking temperatures on the way in. Workers took action and brought about change. Coles agreed to appropriate spacing between workers, providing adequate hand sanitiser and gave workers time to wash their hands. The safety standards won by workers were then implemented across the sector.

OHS win at Lion Dairy and Drinks results in safer workplace and ongoing consultation meetings

In early April, Lion Dairy and Drinks Wetherill Park in New South Wales implemented COVID-19 risk mitigation measures on site. These included separating departments and shifts of production workers so there was no crossover of staff. Worker and UWU member Doug supported this move but was concerned as it only applied to production workers, not all employees in the factory. Other workers could potentially carry the virus across the workforce, making the separation measures put in place redundant. Members spoke to the company but took action after their safety concerns weren't addressed. On 8 April, they stopped work for four hours until the company agreed to take action. Because of workers like Doug, there is now a regular COVID-19 WHS consultation meeting and further risk mitigation strategies have been put in place.

As Doug says: "The only way we were able to push the company to take immediate action was to cease work until our concerns were addressed. Our action on site has established a more consultative approach to COVID-19 health and safety which has led to better safety outcomes for all workers on site. Worker safety should always come before company profit."



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OHS win at St John Ambulance WA making paramedics safer on the job

Pat works at St John Ambulance service in Western Australian and has been instrumental in pushing for increased safety standards for paramedics during COVID-19. Pat and fellow UWU members spoke up and gained agreement from St John for ambulance crews to go 'offline' when they didn't have enough PPE, so they could restock before going to the next job. They also won agreement to introduce Hospital Support Managers, to provide real time feedback to employees regarding their PPE and its correct use.

For Pat being union meant being safer at work. "Our efforts in working with St John have been to ensure the safety of all our members during this pandemic. We have ensured that our members are provided with appropriate PPE and safe evidence-based practices are communicated to our members in a clear, timely manner. Where there have been any shortcomings, we have quickly provided St John with the identified risks and solutions," said Pat.

6. Bring public services back into public hands.

Don't bailout essential sectors—buy them, and bring public goods back into public ownership. UWU recommends essential sectors that make goods or services society universally relies upon should come under public ownership, including firms in the following sectors:

- Energy
- Health and Care
- Early Childhood Education
- Telecommunications
- Transport

Public ownership should not return to the old top-down institutions of yesterday but come with a role for workers and customers in the democratic management of such institutions. Where it may not be appropriate to bring some firms under full public ownership, the use of public funds should come with an obligation on firms to engage in co-determination. This means that one-third of all board positions in firms that receive a corporate bailout as part of this crisis should go to the non-managerial staff of the firm. This is a key way of making sure that public money cannot be used for share buybacks, executive pay or as a fighting fund to lower wages and conditions of employment. Where industry bailouts are granted they should comply with strict conditions of worker co-determination, ethical labour and environmental standards.

The Government's provision of 100% publicly funded early learning for all Australian children during the crisis shows that Governments can choose to fund essential services that make worker's lives better and the Australian economy more productive. While this emergency funding should be increased to meet increased enrolments, the welcomed change presents an opportunity to rethink the entire funding structure and system of early



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learning. If such an essential sector cannot work in a crisis, then it isn't working. UWU recommends the Government maintain and increase support until the October budget and then move towards a model that offers universal, affordable, high quality early learning that is delivered by valued and professionally paid educators and teachers.

7. Invest in renewable energy generation and export infrastructure to rebuild the economy and create secure union jobs for the future.

The Government has an historical opportunity to invest in renewable energy generation to boost the economy, create more secure and well-paid jobs, and tackle the climate emergency.

Fatih Birol, the head of the International Energy Agency, stated "...this is a historic opportunity for the world to, on one hand, create packages to recover the economy, but on the other hand, to reduce dirty investments and accelerate the energy transition."¹⁰ For Australia, this opportunity extends to new energy infrastructure the world needs such as large-scale renewable energy generation, upscaling battery storage, increasing Australia's carbon sinks, and building up the capacity to export hydrogen at a significant scale.

To build this new energy future, which should power a renaissance in local manufacturing; careful attention needs to be given to key bridging measures. Consideration should be given to phasing in a target for the local refining of petroleum, diesel and aviation fuels. This could start with maintaining a target that is equivalent to the 2019 percentage of domestic refining relative to domestic demand. This target can then be phased in to a target of 75% of national demand to ensure continuity of capacity and work through changing energy technologies. This ensures that there is no energy supply gap through fuel technology transitions, and keeps refining skills capacity online as there is strong overlap between hydrocarbon refining and hydrogen refining.

Further, government support is critical to building a renewable hydrogen production and refining industry with good jobs provides cheap energy domestically, and potentially a significant export market for Australia. Other than subsidies, consideration should be given to instituting a guarantee 100% of domestic demand for hydrogen fuel is produced and refined here.

Regardless, significant Government investment is needed to deliver these changes at the scale needed to rebuild our economy and boost secure, well-paid jobs in sustainable industries of the future. Working to create a robust, forward-thinking economy for the future is not only possible, it is essential. It will only work, however, if workers and their union representatives are properly involved and can take ownership over this transition.

¹⁰ Reported 17 March 2020, available at <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2020/03/17/governments-historic-opportunity-accelerate-clean-energy-transition-iea-says/>



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Conclusion

The United Workers Union requests the Select Committee consider the recommendations put forward in this submission and commit to ensuring essential workers of Australia are recognised not just with words, but with action that makes a meaningful contribution to their lives and working conditions.

It is further recommended the Government takes this historic opportunity to readjust our tax settings to deliver the *double dividend* of reduced inequality and boosted growth. This pandemic has not evenly impacted the economy or workers. In this context it makes good economic sense to increase tax offsets and tax-free thresholds for low-income earners and in return seek a greater contribution from those that have come out of this crisis unscathed. In particular those large multinational corporations that benefit from the large public investment in re-energising the economy, as well as having access to our country's rich resources.

These recommendations and ideas are built on the premise that returning to the status-quo is folly, and will only mean we lurch into the next crisis sooner. Australia is still very lucky. The choices we make now will determine if we continue to be lucky. Together we can choose to build a vibrant and sustainable future that works for the many, not the few.

For more information on this submission please contact Lauren Kelly at
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