

18th February 2022

Submission to the Inquiry into the Treaty: International Labour Organisation (Forced Labour Protocol)

Dear Inquiry.

It is important to be aware of and act to address any forced labour. Every human being deserves to be treated with dignity, and to be properly and fairly paid for any work they do so they can support themselves. Forced labour is defined "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily" (Forced Labour Convention 1930, 2.1). Forced labour is one form of slavery, which can be defined as "Modern slavery is the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain" (Anti-Slavery). Forced labour typically impacts on vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals or groups, and exacerbate the challenges and inequality that they face in life - as well as inhibiting their potential for doing what they want to do in life and reaching their potential. While slavery may seem like a thing of the ancient or colonial past, long put to bed by abolitionist efforts, there are *more* people in some form of slavery today than at any time in history (that includes the height of the Roman Empire or during the Atlantic Slave Trade) (Strutt 2018). Forced labour alone severely impacts on some 25 million around the world.

I have long been a supporter of the charity Baptist World Aid, which has pioneered a focus on ethical supply lines and labour practices. They have been publishing ethical shopping guides for the clothing industry and more recently the electronics industry, rating companies from F to A on how ethical their supply chains are (and whether they are acting to be aware of and improve them). This had put pressure on those companies to reflect on their trade practices, but also raised consciousness amongst consumers and society and government about what goes into the things we buy. Tragically, the goods that we use have often relied upon some form of slavery, forced labour, child labour or other exploitative practices in the supply chain.

The Forced Labour Protocol is important to raise awareness of and address forced labour around the world, including cooperation between states. It is not an issue that can be addressed easily by any one country, rather it is an issue that crosses state borders. That includes the fact that many people migrate for work (voluntarily or are trafficked involuntarily) and can be more vulnerable to being trapped in forced labour. Moreover, the globalised society in which we live, inputs to a single product can be made in a variety of countries, which could include forced labour in many of them. This is often very opaque to the consumer at the end of the supply chain who, while they may not always deliberately confront the issues of buying cheap shirts or other goods and what goes into them, would generally say they want businesses and governments to act to ensure their goods are ethical.

We need to be conscious and confront forced labour wherever it occurs. This can include domestically, including exploitation of migrant workers with the threat of penalties (such as reporting them to migration authorities) used to force them to work or accept poorer conditions. We also need to confront forced labour in any part of the supply chains in the good or services that we import for consumption or export for our economy. It is a good step for Australia to sign up to the Treaty and be involved in the movement against forced labour. Australia has recently acted against slavery with the Modern Slavery Act 2018 and other policies, which are quite landmark in taking a strong stance against slavery. Being part of the protocol gives Australia an opportunity and impetus to take greater action and leadership on forced labour. Australia can play an important role especially in the Asia-Pacific region, in which forced labour is a big issue, to exercise leadership in emphasising forced labour and acting - and cooperating with and helping our neighbouring countries to do the same.

Forced labour is a sad and tragic occurrence in the world today. It is a terrible thing that the issue has too often been overlooked or ignored, with so many people languishing in forced labour and other forms of slavery without being given the help and attention that they need. However, it is fortunate that there is growing consciousness of forced labour, businesses are being compelled to take responsibility for their supply chains and are taking more action, and there is more effort on a government and an international diplomatic level to address forced labour. That includes the Forced Labour Protocol - which I commend Australia for signing up to and encourage the

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government to fully take the opportunity to take serious action on forced labour and encourage and assist other countries to do the same.

Kind Regards,

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References

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