

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Pacific region seasonal contract labour

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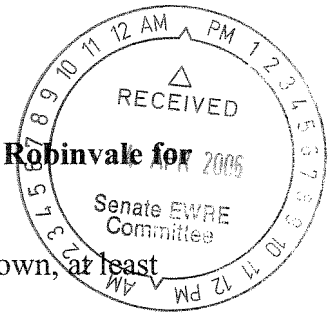
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Robinvale

Submission to Senate Hearing Committee re Inducted Labour into Robinvale for seasonal work from Pacific Islands



Housing: The problems with a shortage of accommodation are well known, at least within the Robinvale community:

1. In Robinvale, there are already urgent problems with the current infrastructure to house workers, particularly low paid workers already in Australia.
 - a) An Asian requiring urgent housing (living in one room with no bath and no toilet available) has applied urgently for Public Housing.
 - b) Backpackers Motel in Euston an Afghani is paying \$100/week for a shared room and other basic needs including food, transport to work, etc are not provided in this cost
 - c) Existing agencies to support the various communities in Robinvale are already under stress to deliver assistance to existing clients.

2. The Office of Housing has two levels of assistance – urgent and general. The general level which has a waiting list of 6 years is not moving closer to such housing because there are too many accessing public housing because of the increasing needs of those in the urgent category: through feelings of vulnerability because of homelessness, inappropriate accommodation, overcrowded accommodation. Families have been on the general waiting list since 1998, and are no closer to being housed appropriately.

3. Swan Hill Rural City Council is not enacting its own bylaws in relation to OH&S with the housing shortage - blatant overcrowding in residences and allow 2 shops (in Herbert Street next to Robinvale Medical Centre) which are used only for sleeping purposes nose-to-toes, plus flats and caravans in the yard behind it. This has insufficient washing, toilet facilities for the apparent numbers of people using this facility. At a Public Meeting in Robinvale 12 months ago, the local CFA Administration Officer asked the CEO of the Council when Council would enact its own by-laws in relation to OH&S and accommodation – or would it take action only after the CFA was forced to remove 20 or more charred bodies from one of these buildings in a tragic fire?

Relationships within the Community

1. There are well documented tensions and violence within the Robinvale community – particularly between Koori and Tongan groups – and these reach flash point intermittently. With the introduction of Inducted Labour from the Pacific Islands the potential is there for more of such tension and violence. Increased competition for housing, jobs may tip the balance.

2. There are no itinerant Asian children or Tongan children attending Robinvale Schools. The Asian children tend to be left in Melbourne with other family members and the Tongan children tend to be left in Sydney and are separated from the parents who are working in Robinvale. Shortage of childcare appropriate for the needs of young children and their parents in these itinerant families is also an issue. Such forced family separations must be of concern to all agencies dealing with human relationships.

3. While Robinvale on one level has great wealth, the majority of people work for low wages in agriculture and horticulture. - There are a lot of unemployed people in Robinvale who can't/won't find work.

- Most people in Robinvale, able to access Centrelink Assistance, have Health Cards. (TAFE Coordinator indicated 2 years ago that the majority of students accessing courses obtain concession fees through the Health Card.)

- From the 2001 ABS for Robinvale – 60% of men aged between 35 and 45 (fathers with families in the main) earn an average of \$300/week. So wages within agriculture/horticulture are low paying.

To introduce Inducted Labour into this town **would create increased competitiveness for available work**. Historically, this will drive wages downwards – this has already happened in Robinvale wherein Labour Contractors have approached growers and offered their workers at a lower rate of pay than those already working for that grower – anecdotally the lower bid wins and the other workers lose jobs – **and this creates a sub –class of working poor**. This then has potential to **increase existing tensions** in Robinvale. There is an attitude that Inducted Workers not take jobs from people who already live in Australia, or access scarce housing resources when others are struggling. There is also concern that, given the new IR laws, there will be a lowering of wages through competition for jobs. There exists no award for these workers – the common scale used among the growers is for recommended pay rates supplied by ADFA (Australian Dried Fruit Association) for dried fruit harvesting, and this has no relation to fresh fruit.

4. From the Queensland model of Inducted Labour from the Philippines: workers who refuse to work for wages offered are dismissed. Such workers have 14 days to find other work before they are deported. Such workers are not eligible for Centrelink Benefits or Medicare Benefits. Anecdotally, Medicare Cards have been “shared around” in Robinvale, for people to access health care. Because of this sharing of Medicare Cards, Medical History for patients can be compromised. If it rains, and there is no work, who supports these workers?

5. The Tongans have become transient. If their children wish to access higher education, the family cannot afford to pay accommodation costs in some other place as well as rent here in Robinvale, so they too move on. Some Islanders find it difficult to access rental property, as barriers are put in the way – some of them have left rental properties filthy in the past, so rental agencies and landlords make it difficult to access rental properties. Most of these rentals are expensive, so there are often 8 or more in a two-bedroom dwelling to share costs. This causes problems, particularly for children trying to study.

6. The Robinvale community as a whole lacks the capacity to cope with further social upheaval, including Inducted Labour from the Pacific Islands – to a certain extent only, the Pacific Islanders have assimilated into the community through participation in the Multicultural Festival and the Community Brass Band. Mostly, even this group is separated into sub groups, divided along denominational grounds. The Asians and Middle Eastern groups exist in isolation, mostly here to work and then to move on. Because there has been little or no integration the town is largely a series of ghettos separated by ethnicity, cultural barriers and language barriers and misunderstanding.

Other Infrastructure Problems:

1. Most of our newcomers have no idea how to access services when they need them, so they mostly go without. Efforts to break down these barriers to service delivery are well intentioned, but not effective across the range of services. The barriers once again are historical to culturally and linguistically diverse communities – language, culture and ethnicity and mistrust.
2. In the Health Services, there is no hospital Midwifery and people must travel to Mildura to access Obstetrics. Often more important are the inadequate and insufficient child health and parenting resources hours (22.1 hours per week) – there is currently no immunization program operating in Robinvale as the person responsible is on leave, and the position not short term filled. Recently interviews for a position in Parenting Resources was held in Swan Hill with no Robinvale people on the panel.
3. There are real concerns that with the introduction of a larger male workforce into the district, that the possibility exists for increased violence. One community worker commented that Robinvale might need a brothel to service this male workforce.

Future of the Grape Industry?

1. It is known that vast tracts of China are planted to grapes. Worldwide this will have an effect – it already is in relation to SPC Cannery and this has impacted on Robinvale growers.
2. Vast tracts across Australia have been planted to grapes, in Queensland, Northern Territory, New South Wales (in recent years thousands of hectares planted, apart from locally) means serious overplanting and depression within the industry, except by corporations.

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