

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Pacific region seasonal contract labour

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Submitter: Geoffrey Beecroft

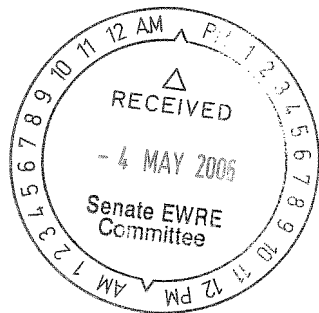
Organisation: Private citizen

Address: 10 Outram Ave
Kyabram VIC 3620

Phone: 0407 302 443

Fax:

Email:



30 March 2006
Geoffrey Beecroft
10 Outram Ave.
Kyabram Vic. 3620
Ph 0407302443

Dear Education Reference Committee,

I am concerned about the Foreign Guest Worker Scheme, proposal currently being examined by the Senate Employment, Workplace relations and Education Reference Committee.

I have done approximately 20 seasons fruit picking in the Goulburn Valley {Shepparton / Kyabram area} Victoria. I am alarmed by this proposal and the fact that the Education Reference Committee will not receive enough if any, advice from experienced seasonal workers about what I think are the real issues and facts.

The impact on the fruit picking industry for local and Australian seasonal workers will be devastating for a already difficult working environment for etching out a living. Already contract labour in groups of about 50 have been hired by Pickworths and Sons an orchardist in Tatura, Victoria, and has pushed out the regular pickers. I was keen to work there next season, but after talking a fellow picker he informed that the orchard in Tatura has Afgans or Iraqis and they do most of the picking now, and the regulars are given the second rate picking and reduced amounts of work. He and other regulars are not likely to work there in the future. One of these contract labour groups was sacked for unsatisfactory work standards only to be replaced by another group. My nephew who worked at this orchard for a time, told me the same news.

I welcome the Education Reference Committee inquiry into the seasonal employment needs in the Goulburn Valley, as this gives fruit pickers in the area a much needed fairer opportunity to highlight their concerns about their workplace situation.

The problem of attracting local and Australian labour is the very low pay rates and has been the issue for as long as I have been picking, [since the late 1970's] and is commonly stated by the the locals who have tried it. Fruit picking is paid by the quantity of fruit picked {piece rate} and the system of determining the piece rate per bin of fruit is a problem because it is unrealistic, unfair and I think a bit corrupt.

Now for the last 2 years I have made efforts to find out how the pay rates per fruit bin picked is determined as myself and other experienced pickers have not found the piece rate consistently on a par with the casual minimum wage rate, even with our many years experience, which should put us constantly above the wage rate. So the average picker understandably falls even shorter of a standard minimum wage, and some very short. Employers will claim it's at hard initially to earn much money but, it will improve later on when a crop is "strip picked" to complete the harvest of a variety. But the truths are it takes most people a few seasons experience to earn a reasonable income, this included myself and other pickers, that I have talked to about this, even as recently as yesterday with an excellent picker who likewise took a few seasons. Another problem that deters local labour is {size & colour} picking which is a time consuming and tedious grade picking of some fruit varieties, which is the vast majorities introduction, to picking. This is very hard work and the pay rate is quite often very low for the time and effort spent right at the beginning of a season is disheartening most local labour, as it too hard, for too little pay, for too long, and is attempted in the peak summer temperatures high 30's & low 40's at times. The only slightly higher pay rate for the added burden of size & colour picking, is about 13% when a average inexperienced picker would incur 50% more time to pick a bin of fruit, compared with the easier strip picking, which also is not paid accurately.

The fruit picking industry in the G.V. as I see it is a exploited workplace and is lacking participation of the government to regulate the pay and conditions in a "hands on" context. The results I have found so far from my efforts to know how and why they are derived are; At a meeting with Bill Shorten of the Australian Workers Union he told me that the organizer for the Shepparton area Ashley Cox was weak he wasn't happy with him and he sacked him. Later from the a.w.u organizer in Benigo who inquired to the Fruit Growers Victoria {F.G.V.} about pickers pay rates, he told me that a trial was run about 8 years ago to determine the fruit bin rates, and that it was conducted on one orchard, one block of fruit and the average time to pick a bin of fruit was one and half hours. Now this is in my, and other pickers opinion is not founded in the truth and the intention to be fair minded towards the workers.

Moreover, because a AWU organizer {Ashley Cox} was present at this last trial, the outcome cannot be refuted even if his representation was unsatisfactory. And even more alarming is that the {FGV} told the AWU organizer Bendigo Ben Davis that if they were to run another trial the pay rate would now be lower because they think the crops

are now better and easier to pick. When I heard this I immediately sensed that to me it was like a mobster threat "don't look at what we're doing or we'll make it worse for you"

Even though the AWU has tried to unionise the fruit picking industry in the last season 2004-05 they would not have gained enough members to bring any real pressure to bear on the {FGV} and have stated that what they ask of the [FGV] they will just say no and there's nothing they can do about it.

I believe the [FGV] have been exploiting fruit pickers for a long time, because we are without fair protection from either the unions or the government. I believe the high numbers of current back packers [75% stated in a local newspaper last season] harvesting the fruit is not good for the fruit picking industry, here in the {GV} or Australia because they have little empathy for the industry's well being. Overseas backpackers are too numerous, and could not be expected to join a union or complain about sub standard pay and conditions. Nor are they good for the economy as I have worked with them and shared accommodation also, one from Belgium told me that they come to Australia to make money to spend in other countries, and there are organisations to help them do this in Europe.

I believe that the wages from fruit picking should be brought into the local economies to benefit Australian families. But this will not happen until a serious effort is made to ratify the pay and conditions in the fruit picking industry of Australia.

Now as for the common "catch cry" of the growers "but we can't afford it" I have as do others, reservations about this excuse to not pay adequate wages. When you take note of their assets eg. as you drive around Shepparton their houses are the mansions of the area. The grower I currently work for has just in the last few years bought a semi trailer I think, they don't really need, a over \$300'000 house and land just because it was up for sale and next door to his already big house and land, 29 acres with another house for extending the orchard, computerised irrigation system, big shed extensions, etc etc. The orchard next door fares even better than this one. It is shameful and un-Australian for growers not to pay fair wages and not care about their immediate communities. Another impact the Guest Foreign Workers Scheme will have on the fruit picking industry and their local communities is its opening a new area for growers to continue to avoid the responsibility of a fair go being neglected to Australian harvest labourers.

Also the growers that seemingly are not doing well, this can also be attributed to laziness, lack of ambition and bad management. And which I think that the growers doing better just "jump on the band wagon" of these growers cases, giving an overall I suspect, a false impression of an industry in hardship.

Current fruit pickers are dismayed and have long lost all hope of their pay and conditions ever changing for the better. They have become hardened and angry with this subject and quote a similar theme "there's nothing you can do" and "there got us beat" and also "they'll just get mob of pickers from overseas" There are I think in the fruit picking environment diverse groups, the largest backpackers, and the smallest regulars that work in the few orchards that have the consistently good crops with better pay and conditions from employers and regulars like myself and the average inexperienced, that are constantly struggling.

My recommendations for solving the lack of reliable labour in the {GV} is to significantly raise the pay and conditions and I will give reasons why:-

1. inexperienced pickers need incentive to not only to endure their first season, but to also return next season. As most of them would be on some sort of centrelink payment and would not earn much more than their allowance, I recommend that they be allowed to retain around 2 thirds of their allowance as a flat rate, not reduced regardless of what they earn. This gives them a firm foundation to work from and the incentive to work more rather than give up, and importantly it supports them through an average season of 3 to 4 months where they will need to learn to competently harvest the different types of fruit and their varieties, eg colour, size, picking apricots, pears, etc and apples later in the season, which are delicate and can't be bruised. Growers will claim that training is given, but these are only tips on technique and are greatly an inadequate substitute for the time and experience necessary to have a hope of earning a reasonable income. And with a season of experience behind them they would now have some confidence and hope for the next season. 1 or 2 seasons may be sufficient for this scheme.
2. A significantly higher pay rate needs to be awarded to fruit pickers, for reasons outlined earlier and also to retain regulars and new pickers.

In summing up orchards, their crops, are inconsistent, and the potential to earn a living is also inconsistent and varies season to season, orchard to orchard, variety to variety etc. There's a scale from poor orchards to work on; to excellent which I believe are few and the pay rate is more likely set from them. The growers have been running things their own way unchecked for a long long time, and their selfish policies are stifling the fruit picking industry for the local labour force, and with the proposal for Guest Foreign Workers to be introduced into the Goulburn Valley shows their on-going disregard for their communities that also support them.

I think other seasonal work regions in Australia would have similar predicaments. Also I have included some letters to the local newspapers and a recent article in a local newspaper.

I urge the Education Reference Committee to recommend that growers lift their standards of pay and conditions rather than seek employees from other countries, and that the government give support and protection to Australian seasonal workers. And take the time and make the effort to implement policies that encourages local labour that, truly reflects respectable pay and conditions in the Australian horticultural industry. Also I ask the Senate Committee to review policies that allow some workplaces to fall between the "cracks in the system" to be upgraded to have adequate safe guards.

Sincerely

G.A. Beecroft.