

Coalition policy welcomed, but more focus on support for migrant workers needed

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The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) and The Salvation Army's Freedom Partnership- to End Modern Slavery welcome the Coalition's announcement of policy to address the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers, but remain concerned it won't go far enough to help workers raise the alarm.

The Coalition has unveiled that it plans to introduce:

- higher penalties for employers who exploit and underpay workers;
- a new offence to cover 'cash-back' schemes, which have been used by 7-Eleven franchisees to underpay their workers;
- new provisions that will apply to franchisors and parent companies who fail to deal with exploitation by their franchisees;
- compulsory evidence gathering powers to the Fair Work Ombudsman
- new penalty provisions relating to the obstruction of Fair Work Inspectors and the provision of false or misleading information to Fair Work Inspectors

FECCA and The Salvation Army welcome the Coalition's pledge of an additional \$20 million for the capabilities and workforce of the Fair Work Ombudsman, but question whether this will be sufficient given the \$17 million in cuts to the FWO in the 2016-17 budget.

National Policy and Advocacy Coordinator for The Salvation Army's Freedom Partnership to End Modern Slavery, Heather Moore said, "We are encouraged by the introduction of new offences and higher penalties, however, penalties are useless if workers remain too scared to come forward. We need policy solutions that balance disincentives for employers to do the wrong thing with incentives for workers to report unlawful conduct."

FECCA Chairperson Joe Caputo said, "Migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation as they may have an absence of support networks and a lack of understanding about the protections that exist in the Australian workplace relations system."

FECCA and The Salvation Army have recommended that workers on temporary work visas must be put in contact with community organisations to provide them with ongoing access to information about their workplace rights and support. The Productivity Commission's 2015 report on Workplace Relations also recommended that community organisations get involved with working migrants earlier to ensure migrant workers were empowered to recognise and report exploitative relationships.

The Coalition have also promised to establish a Migrant Workers Taskforce in the Fair Work Ombudsman to target employers who exploit migrant workers. While we welcome the focus on exploitative employers, FECCA and The Salvation Army emphasise the importance of having equal emphasis on supporting mistreated migrant workers to come forward and access justice.

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