



Australian Council of Trade Unions

MEDIA RELEASE

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Union statement in support of the humane treatment of asylum seekers

Leaders of Australian unions meeting in Canberra today issued the following statement in support of asylum seekers:

Australia has a proud history as a tolerant, compassionate and multicultural nation, and people from all over the world have contributed to our development.

In recent months, there has been an increase in the numbers of people fleeing turmoil in the world, including from conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka.

This has led to a small increase in those people coming by boat to seek asylum in Australia. It should be recognised that these numbers are small in comparison to those people fleeing to other nations and in comparison to those who come to Australia by plane and overstay or breach their visa requirements.

Unions call for international action to achieve peace, equitable development and decent work for all to address the push factors which are affecting this situation and we reaffirm our strong belief that asylum seekers should be treated with respect and dignity.

We must not return to that shameful period in Australia's history where children were locked up in detention centres and Australia avoided its international obligations through processing refugees off shore. We do not want to see a return to the inhumane temporary migration visas that put families in limbo for years.

Australian unions are extremely disappointed with the use of rhetoric to demonise asylum seekers who are fleeing dangerous situations in their home countries and have asked Australia for help and safety.

The demonisation of asylum seekers for political gain, or the abrogation of Australia's international obligations towards refugees is not in the national interest and does enormous damage to Australia's international reputation and standing.

We call for strong leadership from all sides of politics to counter these views and ensure that asylum seekers' rights are respected.

The focus of the immigration policy debate should not be the small number of people who arrive by boat, but the role immigration plays in determining the future of our population and workforce, and the role Australia plays in addressing humanitarian crises in our region.

Unions believe fair, permanent migration benefits the whole community and enriches our culture and society. It also contributes significantly to our economic growth.

Unions however are very concerned about the exploitation of those workers who arrive on temporary migration visas or guest visas. In Australia, unions have witnessed unscrupulous agents and employers use temporary migration visas to exploit workers: rorts where workers are underpaid, forced to pay for poor housing conditions, and/or to work in unsafe workplaces.

Not only are such actions unjust, they also undermine the safety and the wages and conditions of Australian workers. Unions call on the Government to take firm action to ensure the rights of asylum seekers and all migrant workers are respected.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow is available for comment.

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