



Background Sheet 6: Unions and Workers' Rights

People's Inquiry: Exploring the Case for an Independent and Peaceful Australia

What are the costs and consequences of Australia's involvement in US-led wars and the US-alliance?

The Importance of work

Our time at work – the type of work we do, the conditions we work under, the level of pay and our relations with fellow workers – plays a huge part in all of our lives, from young infants to retirees. When our country is involved in war, it has a direct and significant effect on our working lives.

Over the past 70 years young people have been called to fight in a succession of wars which were not in the defence of Australia.

Involvement in these wars impacts workers, and their trade unions, in a number of different ways.

Any profits made from dealing out death and destruction can never cover the costs to workers and their families. Our Defence Force personnel are workers in uniform, and while they bear the brunt, it is working-class communities too that wear the consequences - physical and psychological injuries, broken families and homes. Our public health systems pick up the pieces but still, too often, lives end in tragic circumstances. For many life is reduced to a matter of just surviving. To pay this price is a cost way too high.

There is a cost to workers of government investment in foreign aggressive wars

Involvement in wars of aggression and government acquisition of expensive weapons for offensive wars from multinational weapons manufacturers diverts public funds and working people's taxes away from the community and working people's

Workers are always the major casualties of war on both sides of conflicts

Workers in Australia carry the economic and social costs of Australia's involvement in U.S. wars that have nothing to do with the defence of Australia.



needs - public health, housing, education, welfare, building local self-reliant and sustainable industries and secure jobs in Australia, and addressing climate change.



Workers need a sustainable and self-reliant manufacturing industry in Australia

A weapons industry in Australia which is based on building weapons systems designed for integration into the US war fighting machine rather than the defence of Australia is largely controlled and subject to the needs of large multinational weapons firms. They exercise a great deal of influence over workers' rights and conditions and exploit them for corporate monopoly profits.

In contrast, Australia can be self-reliant and has the ability to safeguard our security and

sovereignty. The Australian working people have the skills, knowledge and creativity to design and build our own self-defence industries and strategies, and do not need to depend on any big powers.

The role of Trade Unions


Trade unions play a vital role as the organisations by which workers fight for their rights at work, and in addition for a more just society.

Through their trade unions workers have a long and proud tradition of struggling for peaceful resolution of international conflicts.

During the First World War the Australian people were successful in twice rejecting conscription for that war, and workers' trade unions played a major part in that struggle.

Notes: Structure of the Australian workforce (ABS Figures 2020)

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, about 22% of workers are employed on a casual basis. Prior to the COVID 19 lockdown of the economy, the unemployment rate was 5% of workers with an underemployment rate of about 9% of workers.



When Japanese forces invaded China in the period leading up to the Second World War, Australian waterside workers refused to load pig iron exported to Japan. Thousands of workers and their unions tirelessly campaigned during the 1930s against Hitler's preparations for war.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s many workers and their unions led mass campaigns against the Vietnam War, banning arms shipments to Vietnam and striking during national Moratoriums of more than 150,000 across Australia. They campaigned and took action in support of Timor Leste Independence and against the Iraq War.

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