

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Ballarat—Wednesday, 23 October 2019

MEMBERS

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WITNESS

Mr Brett Edgington, Secretary, Ballarat Regional Trades and Labour Council.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Brett, for being here to present to the public hearing for this very important Inquiry.

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Mr EDGINGTON: Excellent. Firstly, good morning, all. Thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak to the Inquiry here in Ballarat this morning. My name is Brett Edgington. I am the elected Secretary of the Ballarat Regional Trades and Labour Council. Ballarat Regional Trades and Labour Council is the second-oldest trades and labour council in the world. We began life on 28 April 1856, so it makes us seven days younger than Melbourne. Today we represent 28 affiliated unions in the region that we cover and about 19 500 members. That is a region that covers from Horsham across to Maryborough down to the outskirts of Bacchus Marsh and across to the outskirts of Colac. So that is a little bit about the trades and labour council.

I wanted to start with: many of us reflecting back on our pasts can quite often romanticise what happened, but I was in the very fortunate situation as a young person many, many years ago, when I was 15 getting my first job, to be employed as a service station driveway attendant by Shell. I was paid correctly, I got payslips and I was treated very well, and it set me up, really, for an excellent start in life to lead me to where I am today. Unfortunately what I am seeing more and more—and Ballarat Trades Hall runs a young workers legal centre here at no cost, so we see a lot of young people across the region that we cover coming in through the door day to day with various employment issues—is young people entering the workforce having completely the opposite experience, not being set up for life but being deeply traumatised by their first experience in the workplace. Everything from young hospitality workers being knocked unconscious by their manager in the kitchen to young women working in hospitality being driven to attempt to take their lives. I think it is a really significant issue that we need to grapple with.

Now, I do not know whether my experience many years ago was just lucky or whether there has been a significant change in attitudes towards employment, but I am seeing a lot of young people these days really set up to fail significantly after their first experience within the workplace, and then going back before that, probably starting at the training level here in regional Victoria, there are significant issues regarding transport accessibility to training opportunities.

One story that I did want to raise this morning was last year we were conducting some inquiries about access to training and we spoke to a family from Ararat, a young fellow who was an apprentice and was doing his apprenticeship at Federation TAFE here in Ballarat. The situation was that the train from Ararat in the morning would not get him to his TAFE course on time so that he could do his apprenticeship training a couple of days a week in Ballarat. His father was driving him to Ballarat, and they were staying in their car overnight while he was doing the TAFE training—a remarkable commitment from the father towards that young person. But there are issues like that in regional Victoria that I think we need to explain that act as impediments to training and then obviously employment afterwards.

That is probably my introduction, and I shall leave some time for your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Can I just ask in relation to disadvantaged jobseekers and underemployment, obviously there are some people that go in and out of employment and there are some people who have casual employment and all the associated stresses that go along with being a casual employee. How do you think the union and the Government can assist in that way in terms of trying to assist those people that need the help the most in terms of finding them sustainable employment going forward?

Mr EDGINGTON: Well, I think there are two parts to that. There is the cohort of people that seek temporary or casual employment while they are still in education and training or with the thought of moving on to a more sustainable career. I guess then there is the cohort that move into what will be their job as a breadwinner at the end of that. Once again unfortunately it goes to the Federal Government's Fair Work Act,

but certainly the change in legislation around casuals having the opportunity to part-time permanent conversion I think is a really important one. We see casuals, especially working in hospitality, that have been casual for six or seven years with regular shifts or regular rosters that have never been offered or will never be offered the opportunity to convert that into at least a permanent part-time role so that they can work their life around their work. So I think that is a really significant shift that needs to happen legislatively.

Probably as well I think we need a definition of what constitutes insecure work at the moment. I think we need to head back to the Harvester judgement in the early 1900s and the idea that a job as a right should be able to create a sustainable life where you can pay the rent, put food on the table and occasionally go out to a restaurant and the pictures at the end of the night and cover the bills at the end of the day. I think more and more we are seeing people working one or two jobs or illegally working in the grey employment area and claiming benefits of some type or another that really struggle from day to day to achieve the basic necessities.

Ms ADDISON: Brett, we know that underemployment is a significant issue. We have had Jannine Bennett from the LLEN talk to us today about Ballarat having above the state average in terms of part-time work, which is also known as underemployment, as you know. What could the Government be doing to address the issue of underemployment in Ballarat? Have you got any suggestions?

Mr EDGINGTON: Absolutely. Look, I think there already is a lot being done. Certainly GovHub, health services and State Government service areas are creating sustainable full time, if not permanent part-time, ongoing jobs. That is happening here in Ballarat. But we have seen a rise. Once again it comes back to the Federal Government and the Fair Work Act. I think a lot of employers have found loopholes and ways around creating sustainable, full-time jobs. Ultimately it would be great if we could get every organisation across Australia to sit down and work out what their work requirements are, convert them into EFT positions and create full-time positions around their basic requirements. That would be wonderful. If I am running a warehouse and I know that every day I am going to need 10 staff to perform the functions, there are 10 FT jobs; I can employ 10 people.

A lot of employers I think are undermining or getting rid of their obligations under the act by using labour hire, bringing in a casual workforce. They are sort of circumventing their responsibility for long service leave, for annual leave—all of those things—and really having that flexibility of being able to hire by the hour and fire by the hour their workforce. That said, it is not unusual in regional Victoria to find casual workers that have been casual workers for six or seven years on regular rosters. Ultimately if you could get every organisation to sit down and work out their EFT hours and fill those with full-time, secure positions, that would be really ideal.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Brett, what are the main barriers for young jobseekers in this region, do you think?

Mr EDGINGTON: I think the main barrier for young jobseekers in this region is that for young jobseekers the entry-level jobs—in local takeaway, hospitality, tourism and retail—are sort of where they end up. More and more of the jobs around here are either service jobs from State or Federal Government or manufacturing jobs, and there are skill requirements that a lot of young people are not meeting. So we are finding they are ending up in those sort of entry-level positions and unfortunately the exploitation that is happening to that workforce is going to be more pronounced.

I think travel and transport options in regional Victoria—so talking outside of Ballarat, certainly places like Ararat, Stawell and Maryborough, for example, where we have seen considerable shrinkage of their manufacturing base, their sustainable base—have meant that young jobseekers, to find secure, safe work, have to be able to travel distance. Fortunately we are seeing AME Systems expanding in Ararat, which has been fantastic, and the abattoirs up that way are expanding. In Maryborough, though, we have seen a significant retraction, especially in the manufacturing base, and nothing really that has come in to replace it—only really service jobs and certainly the requirements for those are significant qualifications that are not being met by the people within those communities.

Ms CONNOLLY: What do you think about kids in high school and getting their first job or leaving school, whether they are 16 or 18? How do you think young people find out about a minimum wage, their rights in the workplace, casual work, part-time work, full-time work—what all that means? How do you think young people learn the answers to all those sorts of questions?

Mr EDGINGTON: Well, very fortunately one of my roles as Secretary of Trades Hall is that I am quite regularly invited by teachers into schools, especially to talk to their year 10 and 11 groups. We have a program that we have developed where we talk to them about what their basic rights at work are and where to get help. We do not get to every school and to every young person, but we try to hit as many Year 10 and 11 students as possible.

One of the frustrations I have is that—you were saying that Jannine Bennett was here—the LLEN is an ideally set up organisation, but I think it is being under-resourced and under-utilised. With this wonderful organisation that sits between education, training and employment and employees within the region I think there is more of a role—certainly for career teachers in the LLEN—in providing that education but also in providing I think sound advice on future careers. One of the frustrating things I think is that many career teachers really need to get some professional development and have resources behind them, like the LLEN, to show emerging industries and emerging jobs. The old adage is that if the career teacher sort of cannot quite work out where you fit, go and be a hairdresser or something along those lines. I am not undervaluing those professions at all, but it seems that there are a lot of young people that are driven into certain employment sectors that probably do not challenge them. Especially in Ballarat we have got this wonderful emerging wind industry, we have got this wonderful renewable energy industry and we have got manufacturers here that are at the absolute cutting edge of manufacturing. We have seen some fantastic stuff happen with the tech school and the STEM stuff that is happening through there, but what we are finding with the tech school is that it is quite often the more advantaged kids that are accessing that tech school facility. So I think there is a lot of work that could be done with career teachers at schools, and I think certainly the LLEN is the right vehicle, if properly resourced, that would be able to then provide them information that could lead to better outcomes.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: Brett, thank you for being here. I am interested in parents and the workforce. As a mum to two very young kids myself, it has been a challenge coming back to work, and I know that it is a challenge felt by many mums in particular. Often industry's answer to that is casual work, because of the so-called flexibility in hours, but that then leads to insecure work. From your experience do you know of any models or services that have assisted with that transition for women getting back into secure work in particular and not just falling back on lower paid casual work?

Mr EDGINGTON: Yes, you are right. There are certainly many stories that we hear about young women who go to the boss and ask for maternity leave as casuals and are terminated on the spot. I have even heard of that happening in permanent part-time and full-time positions, where employers have tried to get away with terminating a young woman on the spot after she asks for maternity leave and have tried to drum up some sort of performance reason why that happened.

Certainly I guess the intention is there in the legislation—that there is that maternity leave and then the return-to-work provision. And if the letter of the law was adhered to, that would not be a problem. But there are a lot of people that try to skirt that. And you are right; I think the statistics also bear out that especially for young women and young women starting families there is a significant disadvantage in employment, and a lot of them end up in precarious situations as a result of that. I think we need to overcome that old stereotype too, that men are the main breadwinners and women's wages are something additional to that. There are many families we know now where the woman's income is the significant breadwinner's wage within that household.

Once again at a state level certainly access to training I think is really important. A wonderful initiative has happened with the free TAFE. The success of that can only be shown in the incredible take-up that has happened. I think a lot of young women have taken the opportunity of those free TAFE courses to retrain, re-skill and head into secure work, and it has been really wonderful. It has been great to look at TAFE, even just here in Ballarat, and see the amount of young women that have taken up what would be non-traditional TAFE courses. That has been an excellent outcome.

Federal legislation tightening up some of those provisions and also Fair Work following up on some of those terminations and situations involving young women. As I said, I have had a number of situations where I have seen women come into the workers legal centre, especially those in permanent part-time positions, when they have gone to the boss and said, 'Hey I'm wanting maternity leave later in the year', and then there has been some sort of loophole exploit as to how they—

Ms THEOPHANOUS: And do you see that exacerbated in multicultural communities?

Mr EDGINGTON: Certainly what I have seen in the region that we cover is that multicultural communities overwhelmingly and unfortunately seem to be in precarious employment—casual positions, contract positions, labour hire—and quite often in the grey economy as well. There are significant employers in Ballarat where it is off the books but there is a significant multicultural workforce.

Ms ADDISON: Brett, we have talked about transport and some other issues facing young jobseekers in Ballarat. What could the State Government be doing? Are there further initiatives? Yes, we are very proud of GovHub and our investment in health, but are there any other targeted programs or policies that you think that we could be doing to help young people access employment?

Mr EDGINGTON: I think there is a really simple one. I do not know the mechanisms of how it would work, but we know that Federation University residences are not always fully occupied. Some of the FedUni residences have a significant number of empty rooms available—whether there could be a program, especially for people travelling from Horsham, Ararat, Stawell and Maryborough in to training centres like Ballarat, to have access to those facilities, whether there could be some sort of additional payment that they could make application for that would cover transport and accommodation costs while they were training. But certainly immediately FedUni has a number of res rooms every night that are unoccupied that could be used for that purpose.

Mr ROWSWELL: Brett, you touched on a potential barrier to employment being transport. In this particular region have you, or what would you advocate for in terms of increased transport: services, availability, frequency, accessibility? Are you currently doing that, or is that something that you would consider in the future? What is needed in this region?

Mr EDGINGTON: For Ararat and Stawell, with the Ararat rail corridor I am told that trains are not meeting requirements to be able to get to class on time and then to get home on time through that corridor. That could be a timetabling situation or issue. Once upon a time FedUni had campuses that offered minimal pickings, but at least pickings, in places like Stawell and Ararat, and those campuses have now been withdrawn so people are having to come to Ballarat. There are some offerings in Horsham. I know there is a presence in Maryborough, but once again with a very limited range of training opportunities available. So I guess it is either expanding those training opportunities to those other regional centres so they can stay within their own communities or offering transport and accommodation so they can come to training centres.

Mr ROWSWELL: Have you defined what future transport requirements are needed in this region to make those educational and employment opportunities—I guess those barriers to be broken down—easier for people to access? Have you identified what those transport options might look like?

Mr EDGINGTON: I guess maybe an earlier train coming out from some of the regional centres in Maryborough and Ararat to accommodate students. I think the Maryborough service has two from Ballarat to Maryborough and two returns a day, so that could be a V/Line scheduling issue to make sure that they meet requirements for students travelling. But especially if you are doing apprenticeships, you are often travelling and then having to stay a couple of days and then travel back, so that becomes a significant impediment. Certainly with free TAFE it has been fantastic. As I said, the take-up has been overwhelming and it has been a wonderful thing to watch but there are still students who have not been able to access that opportunity because it is just too difficult.

Mr ROWSWELL: Transportation-related matters.

Mr EDGINGTON: Transportation and accommodation-related issues.

Mr ROWSWELL: Thank you.

Ms CONNOLLY: Brett, have you got any comments around digital connectivity? For those kids that are not here in Ballarat or one of the big regional centres but further out that are having to travel, what do you think? Is that preventing young people, or any jobseekers regardless of age, from looking for work or being able to do their assignments?

Mr EDGINGTON: It is not something that has been raised with me. Sorry, the short answer is I do not know. It is certainly not something that has been raised with me.

Ms CONNOLLY: Okay, that is alright.

Ms ADDISON: Brett, previously when we had some hearings in Melbourne we had groups talk to us about child care being a really big issue for particularly carers, parents who often may have casualised work—they have to work nights of an evening or early starts in the morning or irregular hours. Are you aware of any services in Ballarat—because I am certainly not—that offer out-of-hours care for children? And is that something that perhaps would be worthwhile—the Government looking into extending that service provision?

Mr EDGINGTON: No, I am not aware. It is certainly something really important, because we are seeing massive expansion in Ballarat with people moving out into Lucas and some of those of areas, quite often young families and quite often not with parents or grandparents or extended family—they are probably in Melbourne or somewhere else or Geelong. They are moving up here with no extended family, so it makes it very difficult. I am not aware of any services. And yes, I think it is really significant, especially when you are a casual and suddenly you get called in at 6 o'clock at night and you have got a couple of kids. I certainly think that would be a really important thing.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Brett, what strategies have been proven to reduce discrimination against older people in the workplace, that you are aware of?

Mr EDGINGTON: There have been a lot of strategies tried. Have any of them succeeded? Especially in regional Victoria I think it is really significant—the discrimination against older people entering the workforce. I am getting close to the age now where it is becoming more and more difficult. There have been incentive schemes. Once again, you go back to TAFE. The perception is it is a young person's game. I think we need to get that perception of lifetime training and TAFE. Wouldn't it be great to see the 40- to 50-year-old cohort accessing TAFE more often? I think one of the great difficulties in that is the rules that were brought in around, you know, if you have a Certificate III you cannot go back and do a Certificate II, otherwise you have to pay for it. There are a lot of older workers that would have qualifications that would prevent them from having a funded position in a lower qualification that they might really need to be able to transition.

Mr BLACKWOOD: Do you find that some employers do discriminate against older workers? And have you got any ideas about how we could change the recruitment—

Mr EDGINGTON: I think some employers do it really well in Ballarat. One example is Sovereign Hill here in Ballarat. I know a lot of people that work into their 70s at Sovereign Hill and really successfully. I guess it is the sort of workplace that allows for that flexibility. Certainly I guess in manufacturing too—what I am finding too is the skilled manufacturing base in Ballarat is getting older and older and there is a requirement to keep them on. So, you know, boilermakers and fitters are now in their 50s and 60s, and they are being retained because finding a fitter or a boilermaker is nigh on impossible sometimes. Certainly hospitality and retail, those positions—cleaning is another one too. I see a lot of older women especially in cleaning that have suddenly been terminated, and really cruelly—quite often at 62 or something just before they can access superannuation at 65.

Mr ROWSWELL: If they have superannuation.

Mr EDGINGTON: If they have superannuation, yes. And it is awful, just awful, for them in that situation.

Mr BLACKWOOD: So what do you think employers could do to adjust their recruitment practices around that? There has got to be a way that perhaps even we as the State Government can influence how employers deal with them. Have you got any ideas on that?

Mr EDGINGTON: I think it is overcoming perceptions, once again. I mean, the value of wisdom and experience of the older workforce I see as a great benefit. I just think we need to sell that.

Mr BLACKWOOD: To promote that, yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: And also to encourage older workers to access TAFE and training and retraining—to take away barriers that might prevent them from doing that. I think one of the big ones is that qualification thing: you did a Cert III years and years ago, but you need a Cert II to be able to transition into a new job, and suddenly it is going to be \$800 or \$900 and that is beyond your capacity to be able to fund retraining.

The CHAIR: Any further questions? No? Thanks for coming along.

Mr EDGINGTON: Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.