



A CALL FOR JUSTICE CONCERNING EMPLOYMENT

SEVENTH ASSEMBLY, UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA
RESOLUTION 94.18.03

The Assembly resolved:

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There is no one simple solution to unemployment; there are no magic answers. Economic growth, restructuring of industry, increased competitiveness, deregulation of the labour market (with lower wage levels for low skilled workers), worksharing or reduction of the public sector will not solve the problem, even where they assist the situation. In some cases they will exacerbate the situation. Increased production and consumption of goods is not a satisfactory solution: unrestrained consumerism places the planet at risk and does not deal with questions of global economic justice. However, the economy is not beyond control. Society has a responsibility to ensure that the economy is based on appropriate values and goals, and is directed according to the wishes of society. It is not appropriate that the economy shape and control society. Public policy is a complex matter, because what is done in one area of policy affects what happens to people and society in quite different aspects of life. No one principle can be absolutised.

The role of church councils is to affirm principles consistent with Christian tradition and analysis of the issues, by which to assess current and proposed social and economic policy, as a basis for ongoing research, comment and action by agencies and church members. However, such principles require judgements to be made; the following directions for economic and social policy are implied by the preceding principles, and have been adopted by the 1994 Assembly.

- (1) Australia should adopt the goal of paid employment for all who seek it, providing adequate income and safe working conditions, in the context of a socially just and ecologically sustainable economy, and adopt appropriate measures to ensure that this goal is met, through the cooperation of government, business and unions. There should be an active employment policy, with the public sector acting (in addition to its other roles) as employer of last resort, ie providing jobs to those who have been unemployed for a certain time. High levels of unemployment should not be accepted as long as there is useful work which goes undone, and there are people who are overworked. There needs to be commitment to job creation in the business, public and community sectors, in a way consistent with concern for human rights of workers. As work is restructured it should take account of the needs of workers and their families.
- (2) Dealing with the problem of unemployment must not be at the expense of Australia's Indigenous people. Legislation which protects Indigenous rights should provide administrative processes which are as efficient as possible without compromising those rights.
- (3) Increasing Australia's competitiveness should not be at the expense of human rights or the rights of Australia's Indigenous people. Australia's response to unemployment should be based on the dignity of the human person and respect for human rights. Many factors contribute to Australia's competitiveness in world markets. As the experience of other OECD countries shows, it is not appropriate or necessary that Australian competitiveness be based on low wages and poor working conditions. Rather Australia's competitiveness should be based on a positive industry policy which encourages high quality products and service and value added products, through an emphasis on good management, quality education and training, high quality scientific research and technological innovation, and creative design.



The corollary of this is that Australia must not accept totally free trade. There should be some forms of protection for Australian workers against imports produced in circumstances which contravene international labour standards (ILO conventions) which Australian business is expected to meet. There should also be effective anti-dumping measures.

- (4) Eliminating long term unemployment is a priority issue. There is need for special labour market programs aimed at bringing long term unemployed people back into employment. There is also need to help people early in their unemployment, to reduce the risk of them becoming long term unemployed. While government has a responsibility to provide suitable labour market programs, employers have a responsibility not to discriminate against long term unemployed.
- (5) There is need for an active industry development strategy. Measures such as provision of training and micro-economic reform alone will not provide the jobs which are necessary to keep up with the increasing numbers of people looking for work. There is a need for industry development to provide jobs and limit our foreign debt. This involves cooperation between government, business and unions. The taxation system should be modified to encourage productive rather than speculative investment.
- (6) There is a need for deliberate policies to ensure that wealth created through greater productivity and efficiency is transmitted through the economy to create the jobs which most need to be done, eg to provide new or refurbished infrastructure, better caring services, and so on. Economic growth and micro economic reform by themselves will enrich particular industrial sectors but not lead to additional employment. The taxation system and the public sector have a role to play in this.
- (7) The public sector should be maintained as an effective provider of services and infrastructure. The public sector is an important employer and also funds a large proportion of jobs in the community sector. It supports the business sector through the provision of infrastructure and by buying goods and services from the business sector. Cutbacks to the public sector have a regressive impact, ie reduction in services has more effect on the poor than those on higher incomes. Many so-called productivity cuts do not result in more efficient services, but rather in fewer services or overworked staff.
- (8) There is need for government, business and union policy to take account of the long term personal, social and economic costs of restructuring (long term inefficiencies) as well as the short term apparent increase in efficiency. Business has a responsibility to avoid retrenchments if possible. If retrenchments become necessary, business and government have a responsibility to handle them in a way which minimises the cost to workers and their families and which ensure that notice, support (counselling, financial support eg for relocation) and retraining available to workers. Government should weigh the cost of active employment strategies, such as subsidies to business, against these long-term costs.
- (9) Reduction in poverty should remain a priority. One of the causes of cyclical unemployment is increasing inequality and poverty. When people exist on unemployment benefits or low wages, they cannot afford to purchase goods and services. People are forced to work longer hours, or to have a second worker in the family, simply to make ends meet, putting additional burdens on the job market. Part of the solution to cyclical unemployment is to reduce poverty.
- (10) Care for the environment can create jobs - caring for the land, planting new forests, regenerating bushland, improving the urban landscape and reducing pollution, and so on. Much of the work involved in caring for the environment is more labour intensive than work which damages the environment.
- (11) Business has potential and responsibilities in reducing unemployment. Small business has an important role to play in employing more people and many businesses are making the effort to do so. It is important that state and federal governments pursue policies which facilitate rather than



hamper small businesses. However, unemployment is sometimes the result of business decisions and practices, including restructuring and mismanagement. Business has a responsibility to choose options which minimise negative social impacts, such as cutting costs by other means before resorting to “downsizing”, and retraining workers to use new technology rather than discarding their old workforce.

- (12) There is need to deal with unemployment in regions, as well as nationally. Unemployment is worse in some regions than others. The cost of stimulating economic activity in these regions should be borne by society as a whole, and not by unemployed people.
- (13) Unions have a responsibility towards the unemployed, as well as towards their own members. They have a responsibility to ensure that changes in the economy are widely shared, and do not only benefit a small elite of workers. They also have a responsibility to work with government and business in planning for the future in a way which promotes full employment, at adequate wages and conditions, in an ecologically sustainable economy.
- (14) Moves towards more flexible employment such as worksharing, part-time and casual work need to be made in a framework which ensures workers have adequate income and working conditions.
- (15) Australia has a moral responsibility to ensure that its economic well being is not at the expense of the needs of less developed nations. Australia cannot simply pursue its own interests in the global economy, but must ensure that it acts both justly and compassionately in its trade and economic policies. Australia should encourage initiatives such as international guidelines for global business for which Australian non-government organizations have been campaigning.
- (16) It is important to move beyond valuing people only for their paid work and to create a new consciousness as to what it means to live in community where people are valued for who they are and distribute resources accordingly. We need to learn to love our neighbour.