



To the Members of the Secure Jobs Better Future panel,

This submission is presented in the name of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), and of the hundreds of asylum seekers we support to access education and training and find sustainable employment.

Asylum seekers are amongst the most disadvantaged workers in our society. While most of them have full work rights, they do not receive support in order to find work, nor any Centrelink payments that can support them while they are looking. They therefore suffer from a double disadvantage: without support, it is likely to take them longer to find employment; without income, they need to find work urgently and are vulnerable to unscrupulous employers offering unacceptable working conditions.

For the past seven years, the ASRC has offered employment support to asylum seekers living in the community. It is the only program of its kind in Victoria – and one of very few in Australia.

Over the years, our clients have reported the following:

- working for as little as \$6/hour in hospitality, or \$10/hour in construction
- regularly working up to 16 hour shifts
- being forced to take on cash-in-hand work in areas where safety is an issue (e.g. construction or factory)
- being asked to work as contractors (with an ABN and their own tools) in positions that would usually be that of an employee
- suffering racial abuse at work and having no knowledge of their rights
- struggling to claim unpaid wages and superannuation (if they are repatriated).

In addition to this, the uncertain nature of asylum seekers visas mean that employers usually only offer casual work (Bridging Visas and associated work rights can last for years but there is no certainty of outcome). Many employers are reluctant to employ asylum seekers at all due to their visa – even for short-term casual work. This is difficult to justify as some of the positions are only available around peak times, such as the lead up to Christmas, and Bridging Visas will not expire in such a short period.

This is made worse by the fact that negative press and government discourse about asylum seekers create a perception in employer's minds that asylum seekers are illegal and don't have the right to work, which is false on both counts.

A particular instance that highlighted the vulnerability of asylum seekers in employment was the global financial crisis. As soon as the crisis occurred, many of our clients lost their employment, overnight. Over one week end late October 2009, employment opportunities for our clients dried up. When employers became nervous about their business prospects, workers on Bridging Visas were the first to go.

Asylum seekers are generally not unionised, partly because they do not understand the role of a union, partly because being unionised can be a cause of persecution in their country of origin. They often fear unions as they fear government representatives. Asylum seekers are an invisible, un-represented workforce, with few options and little knowledge of their rights. This makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation.