



the green institute

Submission to Senate Select Committee Inquiry into The Future of Work and Workers

Tim Hollo
Executive Director
The Green Institute Ltd
office@greeninstitute.org.au
GPO Box 557
Canberra, 2601

The Green Institute is a think tank established in order to support, educate on, and expand Green politics. While it is an associated entity of the Australian Greens, the Institute remains independent of the party and its representatives. The opinions expressed in the Institute's publications and submissions should not be taken as reflecting current policy of the party.

Executive Summary

The nature of work is changing. For many people, work is becoming more exploitative and precarious. For many others it is becoming more all-consuming. Across the board it is less fairly distributed, dividing us between overworked and underemployed. This is the outcome of deliberate choices by corporations and governments, and it does not have to be the case.

Paid work as we understand it is a recent invention, and can be reinvented. We humans are more than we sell our labour for. We contribute to and participate in society in many different ways, and people around the world are chafing at the bounds, seeking new ways of being. Thanks to technological developments, it is now possible to imagine a future where work no longer dominates our lives, where we work less, support each other more, and live better.

Current industrial policies and social welfare policies are not simply out of date but are actively holding back change – an approach doomed to fail, and damage people as it fails. Instead, we should be facilitating change and supporting people and communities through it.

A positive approach would involve: supporting jobs in (and Just Transitions to) new industries, and in new or reinvented modes (eg cooperatives and social enterprises); returning education to a broad base rather than training for out-dated skills; and embracing aspects of participation and contribution that do not fit the traditional conception of work (eg volunteering, creativity).

It also means dramatically reinventing social policy. It is vital that we switch from a punitive and restrictive welfare approach to a universalist and enabling approach through a mechanism such as Universal Basic Income, backed by strong labour standards applying across all sectors.



the green institute

1. The nature of work is changing, and we can reimagine it

Thanks to technology, social change and the economic and political climate of recent decades, the nature of work is changing dramatically and fast. Work is becoming more exploitative and precarious for many, more all-consuming for others, and less fairly distributed.

It is important to remember that this is not accidental. While many of the changes have been made possible by technological developments, the way these developments have been translated into personal realities for workers has been the result of a series of deliberate choices by corporations and governments. Because it is the result of choices we have made, it does not have to be the case. We can choose to make it otherwise.

Technology has the capacity to free us from tedious and mundane work and enable us to pursue more meaningful and productive activities. However, it also disrupts and destabilises industries and lives, upping the uncertainty and the pace of life, and facilitating the arrival of new effective monopolies. The challenge is how we proactively take hold of the opportunities it offers to improve our lives, while avoiding the pitfalls of a whole new suite of ways we can be ripped off or exploited. If we are clever enough to build machines which can do so much of our work, surely we can figure out how to structure an equitable, flourishing society where we work less and share the work better.

The increase in inequality and insecurity of work, spreading throughout the industrial sector, across the services sector and into the professions, barely needs introduction anymore. The 'gig economy', zero hour contracts, and the disappearance of whole industries and their related skill-sets is disrupting generations-old patterns of work. These patterns were never fair, but the models replacing them risk being even less fair. The rise of contract and casual work everywhere from cleaning services to academia makes work highly precarious for many of those who have it and increases the divide between those who are overworked and those who are underemployed.

Meanwhile, people around the world are searching for alternatives to the "fetishisation" of work.¹ Ideas of downshifting and tree-changing, and campaigns such as "go home on time day"² continue to arise as people search for 'work-life balance'. People are seeking flexible working arrangements to allow them to balance paid work with caring, volunteering or simple leisure – all necessities for good mental health and quality of life. But even this desire for flexibility is being hijacked, conferring the benefits of flexibility onto the employer (not needing to

¹ Coote, Anna, "The fetishisation of work is making us miserable. Let's learn to live again", *The Guardian*, October 26, 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/26/fetishisation-work-miserable-long-hours-poor-pay>.

² <http://www.gohomeontimeday.org.au/>

³ Russell, Bertrand, *In Pursuit of Idleness*, 1932, <http://www.zpub.com/notes/idle.html>.

⁴ Keynes, John Maynard, *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, 1930, <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>.

⁵ Committee for Economic Development of Australia, *Australia's Future Workforce?*, June 2015, p6, <http://adminpanel.ceda.com.au/FOLDERS/Service/Files/Documents/26792%7EFutureworkfor>



the green institute

guarantee work hours or pay overtime and penalty rates, for example) and the risks (increasingly uncertain hours, unpredictable income, lack of leave or sick pay, and much more) onto the worker.

The desire to work less and have more time for family, leisure, and other pursuits, is far from new. Historically, the stated aim of the great majority of societies has been to work less. The eight hour day was the focus of early union battles and successes, and early and mid 20th century figures saw it as the central goal. Bertrand Russell wrote “In Praise of Idleness”,³ while John Maynard Keynes predicted in 1930 that, by 2030, people would be working only 15 hours a week.⁴

As 2030 rapidly approaches, we seem further than ever from this goal, despite, for the first time in history, having the technological capacity to achieve it.

Work as we understand it is a recent invention, and we can reinvent and reimagine it. We humans are more than we sell our labour for, and we contribute to and participate in society in many different ways. Thanks to technology, which can chain us to ever more unfair and unrewarding work, it is now possible to imagine a future where work no longer dominates our lives, where jobs are more fairly distributed and other modes of contribution and participation are valued, where we support each other more, and where we live better.

The remainder of this submission outlines a range of ways government policy can help achieve that future.

2. Industrial policy – facilitating and enabling new ways of working and participating

It has been demonstrated time and again that attempting to hold back the tide of change, using industrial policy to attempt to prop up old and dying industries, is doomed to failure. Australia’s car manufacturing industry is testament to that fact, and the coal industry is following suit. What is worse, attempts to keep these industries on life support only create more pain and hardship, providing false hope to workers and their families while failing to prepare them for new jobs with parallel or transferable skills.

Instead of attempting to hold back change, governments can and should facilitate appropriate changes while supporting people and communities through the transitions. This will involve, at a minimum:

- Supporting jobs in, and Just Transitions to, new industries with a long-term future;

³ Russell, Bertrand, *In Praise of Idleness*, 1932, <http://www.zpub.com/notes/idle.html>.

⁴ Keynes, John Maynard, *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, 1930, <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>.



the green institute

- Supporting jobs in new, and reinvented, modes of employment, such as cooperatives, social enterprises, and other more democratic and participatory employment options, and ensuring that industrial protections apply to workers in less democratic “gig economy” modes;
- Returning the emphasis of schools and universities to broad-based education, rather than the narrow focus on skills-based training which is equipping young people spectacularly poorly for a rapidly changing world; and
- Embracing broader conceptions of participation and contribution than simply selling our labour, supporting volunteerism, caring, creativity and more.

2.1 New industries

A popular mythology has developed in recent years that the technological revolution will make jobs evaporate, leaving millions out of work. This has been fuelled by reports such as that by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) in 2015, suggesting “almost five million Australian jobs – around 40% of the workforce – face the high probability of being replaced by computers in the next 10 to 15 years”,⁵ as well as CSIRO’s *Tomorrow’s Digitally Enabled Workforce*,⁶ projecting that 44% of Australia’s jobs are at risk of automation in the coming years.

While it is clear that a very large number of jobs are likely to become redundant, this does not necessarily mean that there won’t be jobs to go around – unless we choose to make that the case. David Graeber has famously written about the invention of new “bullshit” jobs to keep us busy, for example.⁷ More positively, on the one hand, there is the potential to develop policies which will encourage and support working less and sharing the jobs more fairly (see 2.4 below). In addition, these reports often glance over the fact that technology and social change also unlock the potential to create new, high quality jobs in other areas. This latter can be supported and encouraged by government policy.

While accurately predicting the growth of new industries and where jobs will be required is difficult, if not impossible (see section 2.3 on education below), some specific changes are clear.

⁵ Committee for Economic Development of Australia, *Australia’s Future Workforce?*, June 2015, p6, http://adminpanel.ceda.com.au/FOLDERS/Service/Files/Documents/26792%7EFutureworkforce_June2015.pdf.

⁶ Hajkowicz, Stefan; Reeson, Andrew; Rudd, Lachlan; Bratanova, Alexandra; Hodggers, Leonie; Mason, Claire; Boughen, Naomi, *Tomorrow’s Digitally Enabled Workforce: Megatrends and scenarios for jobs and employment in Australia over the coming twenty years*, Data61 | CSIRO, Brisbane, 2016, <https://publications.csiro.au/rpr/pub?pid=csiro:EP161054>.

⁷ Graeber, David, “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs”, *Strikemag*, August 2013, <https://strikemag.org/bullshit-jobs/>



the green institute

For example, a cursory glance at both scientific evidence and global markets shows that the coal industry has no future, while clean energy industries and environmental remediation will necessarily boom. Additionally, artificial intelligence and machine learning make a wide range of repetitive jobs obsolete while opening up an array of new options in research, development, coding, services and more. Our aging population, usually seen as a threat, also presents great employment potential if we stop marginalising and demeaning the vital and rewarding work of care.

A full survey of these options is unnecessary, impossible, and beyond the scope of this submission. However, it is salient to take one example: jobs in the energy industries. Current government energy policy is predicated on an assumption that jobs in the coal sector must be protected while jobs in energy efficiency, renewable energy and remediation of fossil fuel mining sites are irrelevant, less valuable, or illusory. Government is using regulation, subsidies, tax policy and rhetoric to attempt to achieve this goal which, as noted, is both doomed to fail, and to hurt people and communities while failing.

A far better industrial policy to create better, more long-term jobs would be to shift incentives across the board towards a swift transition to renewable energy and energy efficiency, and invest in remediating mine sites. Central to the success of such policy would be the development of Just Transition strategies, in consultation with affected communities, to support a combination of retraining, reskilling, relocation and retirement for workers in the closing industries.

2.2 New modes – democratic workforces or platform monopolies

Technology has enabled change not just in the way we work but in who we work for, with the potential to make life for workers better or worse. We need to both support the better and protect against the depredations of the worse.

On the positive side, technology provides tremendous capacity for democratising work, creating fertile ground for the development of worker-owned cooperatives, social enterprises and other similar modes where workers have – literally – more ownership of their work. This gives people the opportunity to choose what they do, where, when, and in what ways. The online culture of open source, wiki and other modes of co-creation, despite being under attack, nevertheless nurtures these practices, which create a better, fairer environment for workers, as well as more creative and productive enterprises and more interesting and useful products and services for everyone else.

Government can and should support the development of cooperatives, platform cooperatives, social enterprises and similar, through streamlining of regulatory and compliance processes, or even with positive tax treatment.

Of course, not all workers will find jobs in worker-owned cooperatives or similar in the short or medium term. Many will be stuck in traditional corporations or,



the green institute

often worse, the new “platform monopolies”. This leaves workers in ever greater precarity. Indeed, former US Labor Secretary Robert Reich has written: “The new on-demand work shifts risks entirely onto workers, and eliminates minimal standards completely. In effect, on-demand work is a reversion to the piece work of the nineteenth century - when workers had no power and no legal rights, took all the risks, and worked all hours for almost nothing.”⁸

As well as supporting democratisation of the workforce, as enabled by technology, government should protect workers in the “gig economy”, where abusive industrial practices have also been enabled by the same technology. This should involve legislatively applying worker protections, from leave entitlements to minimum wage, collective bargaining rights to national employment standards, to all workers, regardless of who they work for and how. These vital protections can and should be supplemented by the systemic support of a Universal Basic Income (see section 3).

2.3 Education, not just training

As noted, it is impossible to accurately predict what jobs and industries will survive and thrive in the decades ahead, but it is clear that many will be dramatically different from those of the present. Computers are increasingly not just making repetitive and menial tasks obsolete, but now are replacing far more intricate and high-skilled tasks from legal drafting⁹ to anaesthesia¹⁰ and beyond. While we cannot know what computers may or may not be able to do at the current rate of acceleration, it is reasonably safe to assume that they will continue to be least suited to the most ‘human’ skills of critical thinking, creativity and caring.

In this context, the narrow focus on skills-based, “job-ready” training which has increasingly been forced into the education system from primary schools all the way to universities, is equipping young people spectacularly poorly for a rapidly changing world. What is required, instead, is education for education’s sake, developing curiosity, interest in ideas and knowledge, and those ‘human’ skills of critical thinking, creativity and caring. These are what will equip people with what it takes to flourish in a rapidly changing world.

This area could be the subject of an entire, complex submission in its own right, but can only be glanced over here. However, it is worth noting specific policies in this area could include:

⁸ Reich, Robert, “The Share-the-Scraps Economy”, *The Huffington Post*, 2 February 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-reich/the-sharethescraps-econom_b_6597992.html

⁹ Deloitte Insight: Over 100,000 legal roles to be automated, *Legal IT Insider*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.legaltechnology.com/latest-news/deloitte-insight-100000-legal-roles-to-be-automated/>.

¹⁰ Atchabahian, Arthur and Thomas M Hemmerling, “Robotic Anesthesia: How is it Going to Change Our Practice?”, *Anesth Pain Med*. 2014 Feb; 4(1): e16468.



the green institute

- Reversing the corporatisation of particularly higher education, which demands a churn of ever more students, given less attention (fewer academic staff and shorter semesters) and less choice (slashing the range of subjects offered in curricula);
- Rewarding teaching and learning instead of demeaning them; treating them with respect, and demonstrating an understanding that they are valuable in their own right, not solely as a mechanism for developing skills of production and consumption;
- Required by both the above, investing properly in education, from early learning through to post-graduate education; and
- Enabling students to study, learn and engage with their education more fully – in practice this would involve making tertiary education free again, and introducing a Universal Basic Income, or at least a universal youth payment, so that students do not need to work busy jobs, leaving too little time to even attend classes.

2.4 Broadening conceptions of contribution and participation

Increasingly, our political, economic and social discourse only acknowledges one useful form of participation and contributing in society – traditional paid labour. Other forms, such as volunteering or caring, or those forms of labour which are most difficult to earn a living from, such as the creative arts, are treated as less valid, or even self-indulgent, practices despite frequently adding more to social value than some highly paid labour.

If we consider that many forms of labour as we currently value it, from manufacturing to banking, sales to legal drafting, may soon be automated out of existence, clearly we need to broaden our conception of how we best contribute to society. This is before we even consider the evidence that we are happier, more fulfilled, and more productive, when we are volunteering, participating in community activities, involved in artistic pursuits, and spending time caring for each other without the constant pressure to work harder.

For the first time in history, technology enables us to envisage and create a world where work no longer dominates our lives, where jobs are more fairly distributed and other modes of contribution and participation are valued, where we support each other more, and where we live better.

The central policy lever government can use to help deliver this vision, alongside education and legislated worker protections, is to shorten the officially recognised working week to 28 hours. With so many people already seeking the right to shorter, or more flexible, working hours, and with the clear and increasing divide between those who are overworked and those who are underemployed, a legislated shorter working week would lead to a fairer distribution of work and a more balanced position for work in our lives.



the green institute

In addition to shortening the working week, government can recognise the role of volunteerism, caring, creativity and other non-paid-labour modes of contribution and participation by either actively enabling those who engage in them to access financial support or, preferably, working towards a Universal Basic Income which does not discriminate between any forms of contribution.

3. Social welfare – towards a Universal Basic Income

If the shadow of mass-automation teaches us anything, hopefully it can be that stigmatising those who, through no fault of their own, cannot find work, is utterly wrong.

Regardless, we already have clear evidence from numerous evaluations that punitive policies such as ‘Welfare to Work’ and ‘Work for the Dole’, the ‘Basics’ Card and ‘Healthy Welfare Card’, and shifting single parents and people with a disability onto Newstart, are not only ineffective and complex to administer, but they are actively harmful to people and are undermining the work-readiness, financial resilience and mental health of those they purport to help.¹¹

The current approach to welfare is through an outdated model designed around the working conditions of the 1960s and 70s. Changes to the system over the last couple of decades have led to an increasingly complex and punitive system that is both ineffectual and increasingly expensive to administer. It seeks to micro-manage the unemployed without having the resources for effective case management or support, resulting in illogical participation requirements that often fall over as a result of the inability to contact Centrelink staff – with ongoing IT failures, millions of unanswered calls, and more time spent waiting on the phone than participating in poorly directed and ineffectual training programs. The complexity and lack of trust combine to create a series of perverse disincentives in the form of high marginal tax rates and taper rates, liquid assets tests and so on – which reduce the financial resilience of would-be workers, increase the risk that by bouncing above or below income thresholds they will be excluded or breached – making each trip in and out of short-term employment and each unpredictable pay-packet a kind of Russian roulette.

This approach has been bad enough up to now. However, in a world where more and more existing skills will be obsolete, where people are seeking alternative ways to contribute and participate, and where technology has driven a shift to even more insecure, unpredictable and piecemeal work, it becomes completely unworkable.

¹¹ See for instance the evidence from recent inquiries by the Senate Committees into [income inequality](#), [Indigenous programs](#) and [grants, Newstart Allowance](#), the [social determinants of health](#), and the Government’s proposed [2016 ‘budget repair’ measures](#). Combined these reports demonstrate the evidence against these effectiveness of investment in these punitive policy measures has been before the Parliament but has not influenced their direction.



the green institute

The clearest alternative is to switch tack altogether and build a system based on enabling people to make their own choices through a Universal Basic Income.

A UBI, most simply expressed, is a system where income does not start at zero. Just as we do not, in a decent society, expect people to do without at least basic health care, and at least basic education, we should not expect anybody to live without at least a basic income. Taking the form of small, regular payments to everybody, unconditionally, it would be far simpler to manage than the current system, avoid its pitfalls to do with effective marginal tax rates, etc, and reverse the damaging punitive approach to welfare, instead embracing a universalist attitude which trusts people instead of treating them as constantly under suspicion.

A UBI is an important mechanism for supporting people through the enormous changes to work which are coming in the decades ahead. But, more deeply, it is an enabling policy for the work life of the future which technology has made possible. It's the kind of policy we will need if we are to encourage people to retrain for a new career, to accept piecemeal and less predictable work, to step back in order to care for children or aging parents, to spend longer in education, to volunteer for a community organisation or set up a community garden, to put time and effort into creative arts, or to take the risk of starting a new business. Without a UBI, those decisions are hugely fraught and confronting. With it, they become imaginable, opening up new worlds of possibility.

Obviously, adopting a UBI will not happen immediately or in one single move, but government can start making moves towards it immediately. This would involve reversing the ever increasing conditionality of support payments and making them available to more people. The next step could be universal youth payments or universal pensions, as we slowly build towards a full UBI.

It is important to emphasise, as the many other ideas raised in this submission make clear, that a UBI is not and should never be considered a silver bullet which can solve all the challenges to the future of work and workers. It must be implemented alongside continued and increased investment in public health and education, industrial policy to support the development of new industries and new modes of employment, the right to a shorter working week, and strong, legislated workers' protections from leave entitlements to collective bargaining rights and more.

7. Conclusion

The Green Institute encourages the Senate Select Committee to set out an ambitious agenda for change over coming years, or risk Australia being left behind or locked into systems which will be seriously detrimental to the great majority of Australians. It is our submission in particular that recommendations should include:



the green institute

- i. Supporting jobs in new and growth industries, such as renewable energy, environmental remediation, technology and caring;
- ii. Investing in thorough, consultation-based Just Transitions strategies out of the old, sunset industries;
- iii. Supporting the development of more democratic and participatory modes of employment, such as worker-owned cooperatives, platform cooperatives and social enterprises, through the streamlining of regulation and compliance;
- iv. Legislating proper protections, from leave entitlements to collective bargaining rights and beyond, for all workers, including in the “gig economy”;
- v. Returning education to education, increasing investment and removing the skills training focus;
- vi. Shortening the official working week;
- vii. Actively supporting volunteerism through making financial support accessible; and
- viii. Beginning the development of a Universal Basic Income through progressively making payments more widely available and removing conditionality.