

Rural hire's human toll



Alarming evidence from a NSW inquiry into migrant workers renews urgent calls for national labour hire reform, writes **FIONA DAVID**

Horrific findings uncovered in the recent NSW hearing looking into migrant workers in rural and regional NSW are yet another wake-up call to legislators that the sector is long overdue for more effective regulation.

Following a three-year campaign investigating more than 500 employers in the horticultural labour hire industry, the Fair Work Ombudsman will at last roll out more surprise inspections targeting the least compliant regions of Australia.

Despite this, the problems will likely persist in the absence of stronger labour hire reforms.

The latest hearing is a case in point – the NSW inquiry heard that medical practitioners from the Riverina region were reporting multiple, ongoing instances of unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse, and sexually transmitted infections in the population of vulnerable female PALM workers.

Unable to afford medical care and in danger of breaching their visa conditions, these women are prone to falling through the cracks.

It's the same story every time: they're a Pacific Islander worker, here to support their family, their children are back home being looked after by relatives, and they are confronted with either going back home or breaching their visa to work a physi-

cally demanding job while pregnant.

On top of the lack of options for these women, they are doubly confronted with inadequate accommodation, working in untenable conditions where they are forced to work excessive hours below minimum wage while regularly threatened with deportation.

The inquiry has heard that while one in four workers in rural NSW were required to live in accommodation provided by their employer, 90 per cent were exposed to exploitation and lacked safety in their housing.

Unsafe and overcrowded, there are instances of people camping in backyards, "hotbedding" where shift workers on rotation will share the same bed, and difficulties in monitoring accommodation arrangements for PALM workers.

These are well-known issues and they're straining regional health and community networks which are inadequately equipped to handle them.

Ultimately the horticulture labour hire industry continues to be a refuge for dodgy brokers and agents, some of whom have links to criminal enterprise.

Meanwhile the patchwork of state and territory laws enable these bad operators to avoid accountability by changing locations and moving to the

state with the least regulation.

Currently, three states have labour hire licensing schemes and four do not.

Despite the presence of a labour hire scheme, breach rates remain high in Victoria. Individual farmers are having to navigate piecemeal regulation to stay compliant with labour hire laws.

This burden has the National Farmers Federation so concerned that they too are speaking out about the "confusing rhetoric" small farms are having to deal with.

Back in 2019, the Federal Migrant Workers' Taskforce urged the federal government to establish national labour hire regulation, and for registration to be mandatory for agents operating in the horticulture, meat processing, cleaning and security sectors.

The case for consistent and effective labour hire regulation to streamline compliance and assure decent working and living conditions has been clear for some time, yet legislators are continuing to drag their feet.

There is plenty of support for such reform from the farmers themselves to big brand supermarkets.

Workers in Australia deserve better, and the time to act is now.

Fiona David is the founder of Fair Futures