

HOW YOUNG IS TOO YOUNG FOR A FIRST JOB?

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It is time for South Australia to set a minimum working age, say campaigners who are calling for better protections for kids as young as 11.

Children's Commissioner Helen Connolly has produced a report on the working conditions of the state's youth and found many face pressure to work or are exploited in the workplace.

It comes as the union representing retail and fast food workers has written to the state government urging it to implement stronger child labour laws.

Ms Connolly's Teenagers and Work survey – which involved 907 youths aged 11 to 19 – found many enjoyed the independence and financial benefits of employment. However, about a third reported they felt pressured to take a shift, even after saying no.

The same number had felt pressure to work when sick.

Almost one in five had been shouted or sworn at by a customer, and one in 10 said they had been treated that way by a manager.

There is no legal minimum working age in SA, although the federal government last year signed up to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention which urges a minimum age of 15.

Ms Connolly makes recommendations for government including:

SETTING a minimum working age;

REQUIRING parental consent for young workers in certain jobs, especially more physically demanding or risky roles;

SCRAPPING junior pay rates for young people aged between 17 and 21; and,

MANDATING work readiness courses at school, from year 9 onwards.

Her report notes some companies set their own minimum hiring age.

For example, McDonald's and KFC recruit children aged 14 or older, while at Target, Woolworths and Coles the youngest employee must be 15.

The Shop, Distributive and Allied Employee's Association (SDA), which represents many young workers, backs the call for a minimum working age and also wants limits on how many hours students can work during school terms.

SDA SA secretary Josh Peak last week wrote to Attorney-General Kyam Maher, urging him to implement similar conditions to those in Victoria, where there is a minimum working age of 13. Parental permission is required until age 15.

Teenagers in that age bracket are only allowed to take on "light" duties, in line with the ILO convention.

Victorian school-age children can only work three hours a day on weekdays and a total of 12 hours during a school week.

Those limits are lifted during school holidays.

A state government spokeswoman said it was "currently considering what legislative reforms may be necessary".

Any changes would require consultation with union and business leaders "to avoid disruption and ensure that children have access to both a quality education and appropriate employment opportunities", she said.

Mr Peak said the SDA represented workers as young as 12 and had noticed more 13 year olds entering the workforce.

Ms Connolly's report found the rising cost of living and post-pandemic labour shortages were driving rising employment among young teens. "It is increasingly common for children aged 12 and 13 years to be working in casual jobs," the report states.

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