

MEDIA RELEASE

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Union slams Labor proposal to have Productivity Commission assess free trade deals, pledging campaign to overturn policy

A commitment that a future Labor Government would have the Productivity Commission conduct an economic analysis of all free trade agreements, announced today by Shadow Trade Minister Jason Clare, is a completely inadequate response to the damage these agreements continue to inflict on Australian workers according to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union.

The union singled out the nomination of the Productivity Commission as the agency responsible for the analysis, saying the organisation was so ideologically wedded to free trade that the outcomes would be meaningless.

“The Productivity Commission is so blindly pro-free trade that seeking their analysis of whether a trade agreements is in the national interest will be a useless exercise that at best is deeply misguided and at worst will be nothing more than a cruel hoax on the workers and industries that will be left worse off,” CFMEU National Secretary Michael O’Connor said.

“The important work of scrutinising trade agreements should be done by a truly independent body, but Labor’s plan to hand it to the Productivity Commission is nothing short of entrusting Dracula with the keys to the blood bank.

“If Labor presses ahead with implementing this proposal, there is no question that Australian workers will suffer.”

The CFMEU, which has a membership of 110,000 blue collar workers, said the policy announcement revealed Labor still had a lot more work to do on ensuring trade policy served the best interests of the Australian public.

The union committed to campaigning within all Labor Party forums — including the National Conference — to amend the policy to completely remove the influence of the Productivity Commission from all aspects of Australia’s public policy framework, including trade, investment, superannuation and tax.

“The public rightly have no regard for this organisation that is little more than a taxpayer-funded right-wing think tank who time and again maintain their defence of deregulation, privatisation and failed neoliberalism,” Mr O’Connor said.

The CFMEU said that while the Productivity Commission has provided superficial criticism of the preferential nature of recent trade agreements, including that reached with China, these statements simply hid their broader agenda of promoting the unilateral removal of tariff and foreign investment barriers.

Mr O’Connor highlighted efforts by the Productivity Commission during the past decade to push for the dismantling of Australia’s anti-dumping system, with efforts to defend local industries from unfair trade simply attacked as being “protectionist”.

“The Productivity Commission is led by free trade extremists, which the Labor party looks to be empowering through a policy that would lazily endorse them for this vital work,” he said.

“Labor’s announcement is a tricky attempt to pretend to be doing something about genuine community concerns, when the reality is the continuation of a business as usual approach to trade policy.

“More of the same on international trade will simply mean our nation will see more exploited temporary workers, more dangerous imported products, more hollowing out of Australian industry, more risks to our democracy and more pain for workers, their families and their communities.”

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