



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

The Harvester minimum wage case commemorated and invoked on its 110th anniversary

Media Release

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This year is the 110th anniversary of the landmark *Harvester* minimum wage decision by Justice Higgins in 1910.

The basic objective of *Harvester* was to set a fair and reasonable minimum wage that would provide a decent standard of living for workers and their families. The *Harvester* minimum wage for unskilled workers came to be regarded as the Australian living wage.

Harvester was commemorated and invoked by the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCER) in its recent submission to the Fair Work Commission's annual wage review.

ACCER's submissions traced the influence of Justice Higgins and others on the legislation and decisions that enabled the setting of the living wage. ACCER's submissions also drew on the assessments of former High Court judge Michael Kirby and former Prime Minister Bob Hawke regarding the influence that Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* had on the legislation and policies that resulted in the *Harvester* decision.

The principles advocated by living wage movements in Australia and elsewhere of a century ago are now recognised in established international human rights.

ACCER was represented at the Fair Work Commission hearing in Sydney on 18 May by its past-president Brian Lawrence and Fr Frank Brennan SJ, the Chief Executive Officer of Catholic Social Services Australia.

The Fair Work Commission has been asked to give priority to helping working families in its current wage review.

ACCER has sought wage increases that favour low paid workers in an effort to alleviate poverty in low income families.

ACCER has asked the Fair Work Commission to increase the National Minimum Wage to \$710.00 per week, an increase of \$37.30 per week, and to increase all award wage rates by \$30.70 per week.

These are greater increases than those sought in previous years because of recent changes to family payments. The School kids Bonus was abolished at the end of 2016, with a major impact on families with school age children. The loss amounts to \$8.24 per week for each primary school child and \$16.40 for each secondary school child. In addition, Family Tax Benefits have been frozen for the next two years.

Over the past four decades increases in minimum wages have been discounted because of improvements in family support payments. Now that these improvements in the social safety net are being wound back families need extra support from their wage packets.

The cuts in family payments will exacerbate widespread poverty among low income families. The Australian Council of Social Services' report, *Poverty in Australia 2016*, found that depending on the measure of poverty used between 622,700 and 1,051,100 Australians were living in poverty, within households where there was a person in full time employment, and between 731,300 and 1,049,900 children under the age of 15 were living in poverty.

An extract from ACCER's submission to the Fair Work Commission is published online, [The Harvester minimum wage case and its importance to Australian society after 110 years](#). It includes additional commentary on the *Harvester* decision and several of the key figures in the case.

Further information: www.accer.asn.au

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