

Work for the Dole slammed as unsafe, forced-labour scheme

By: Anna Patty
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The national Work for the Dole program is facing criticism for failing to protect the safety of volunteer workers and not helping many find work suited to their skills.

Australian Unemployed Workers' Union president Owen Bennett is urging the abolition of the Work for the Dole scheme and has launched a petition on Change.Org raising safety concerns.

The campaign follows the death last week of 18-year-old Josh Park-Fing, who fell from a trailer towed by a tractor while he was on the Work for the Dole program in Toowoomba.

Mr Bennett said his organisation has received several reports of cases where the safety of workers in the program has been threatened. He said workers with chronic injuries had been forced to engage in strenuous work to avoid losing their Centrelink benefits.

Mick Smart, 30, of Newcastle, said he was expected to dig holes and push heavy wheelbarrows in February as a volunteer for a charity group, despite having problems with his back. He was assigned compulsory Work for the Dole after being for unemployed three years.

"I fell down a retaining wall and twisted my back pushing a wheelbarrow," he said.

"I've been told I have no access to WorkCover because technically I was not working: I was a Centrelink volunteer."

Mr Bennett alleges unemployed workers have been threatened with the loss of unemployment benefits if they raise concerns about the safety of their Work for the Dole site.

"Work for the Dole is dangerous," he said.

"It is a billion-dollar forced-labour program which does not help people into work. It must be abolished immediately."

ACTU president Ged Kearney said Mr Park-Fing's death should be fully investigated.

"And given widespread concerns with the Work for the Dole, it must be done in context of the whole program, which the ACTU believes is deeply flawed on many levels."

A former employment services officer told Fairfax Media he had been pressured to place a woman with a back injury into a voluntary aged-care job under the Work for The Dole scheme.

The former officer said the woman would have been better suited to a role as a volunteer in an education program for Indigenous people.

"It was about filling placements and meeting targets and not what was best for the individual to rebuild their career," he said.

He said refugees were placed in cleaning jobs regardless of their qualification level.

A Work for the Dole supervisor in the NSW Hunter region told Fairfax Media that job providers were often inflexible and "like robots" in dealing with people with mental health and other social problems, including homelessness.

Australian Greens spokeswoman on community services Senator Rachel Siewert also raised concerns.

"It does bring into question whether the Work for the Dole measure is providing adequate occupational health and safety for those forced to participate," she said.

A spokeswoman for Employment Minister Michaelia Cash said Mr Park-Fing's death was "a tragic event that should not happen in any Australian workplace".

"The government extends its deepest sympathies to the family and colleagues of the young man.

"The matter is currently being investigated by the relevant authorities and the government will take whatever action is necessary to ensure that appropriate standards are maintained."