

students' rights at work

youth wages



what are youth wages ?

Low pay in the form of youth wages is the biggest problem facing young workers and students today. Most young people aged 21 years old or under only get paid a percentage of the adult rate. Youth wages or Junior Wages are rates of pay determined by how old you are.

They are a percentage of an adult wage, and apply to most workers aged between 15 and 21. For instance, a 17 year old retail sales assistant would usually get paid 55% of a full wage, whereas a 19 year old doing the same job might get paid 80% of the full wage. A 21 year old worker would get the full adult rate.

Most young workers are employed in the retail, fast food, hospitality or customer service industries. Many companies in these industries are built around young low paid workers. Young people are the ones cooking the burgers, dishing out the soft serve and operating the cash registers. In supermarkets often 15, 16 and 17 year old workers operate the checkouts at 10 o'clock on a Saturday night, or spend their Sundays stacking shelves.

Often these companies also rely on 18, 19 or 20 year old workers to be duty managers and supervisors. This means that the majority of the most essential and basic work is done by young workers. These young workers make a valuable contribution to the workplace. They are hard working, energetic and often work in busy and stressful environments. They deserve decent pay.

why are youth wages discriminatory?

So why do bosses think it is ok to pay some workers much less than others for doing exactly the same work? The concept of youth wages is nothing more than total discrimination on the basis of age. The simple reason that bosses pay young workers such low wages is to cut costs in order to boost profits.

There are a few ways that bosses cut costs. One way is by employing young people and paying them youth wages. Another way is by employing all of their staff on a casual basis. In a nut shell youth wages and casualisation equals massive profits for employers.

did you know?

equal pay

Until 1972 women were only paid about half of what male workers earned. The arguments used by bosses in favour of giving young people less than a full wage, are the same as the arguments used by bosses in the past in favour of paying women less than men. It was only through organising women into unions and fighting that we achieved **equal pay** for women. A similar fight need to be waged today by young people.

In the past some migrant and indigenous workers were only paid *one third* of the wage of their white co-workers. This was changed by both white workers, migrant workers and indigenous workers sticking together and fighting for decent pay.

myths and facts about youth wages

Many bosses try to justify paying young people poverty wages. Below are some of the myths they use backed up by some real facts about the situation.

Boss's myth: Young people need more supervision and training than older workers. That's why you get paid less.

Worker's fact: Many young workers have had previous work experience. Some have even worked as supervisors or managers. While all workers need some initial on the job training it is rubbish that young people are harder to train than adults. Often they are much easier to train. If young people needed more training than older workers why is it that bosses often write young workers off the roster once they have turned 18 or reach the full adult age? This is only because it costs them more. They are not interested in having workers with experience only workers with small pay packets. The practice of writing people off the roster is of course illegal, and it's discrimination on the basis of age. An employer cannot sack you for being too old.

Boss's myth: Young workers don't deserve the adult wage.

Workers fact: The fact is employers expect young people to perform the same duties and work just as hard as everybody else so it's only fair for young workers to expect the employers to pay them a decent wage. The concept of equal pay for equal work should apply to all.

Boss's myth: Young people are lazy

Worker's fact: Across the country 16 and 17 year olds are employed as supervisors and duty managers. Often they have to supervise people twice their age. The pace of work in fast food and retail is also much faster than in industries dominated by older workers. Most of the time young workers are juggling work and study commitments. This can hardly be called lazy.

Boss's myth: Young people don't have to support families. Therefore you don't need full pay.

Workers fact: Most young people do support themselves in some form and often contribute to their household income. Young workers don't get half price rent, food or petrol. If we get charged full price for the cost of living it is only fair that we get full pay. Because of youth wages many young people are forced to live in poverty even though they have jobs.

Boss's myth: Abolishing youth rates would increase youth unemployment

Workers fact: The argument that employers will be less likely to employ young people if they have to pay them more is rubbish. There is absolutely no evidence to support this. When unemployment is at such low levels and with a chronic skills shortage where are they going to find these people to fill the jobs? Most fast food and retail outlets want to attract young customers that is why they employ young workers.

fight to abolish youth rates

Youth rates hurt all workers because the lowest wage in a labour market determines all other wages. This means that adults are more likely to be forced into accepting lower wages if they know that the boss could employ a young worker for less. Low adult wages mean more young people working on low youth wages to support their families. The long-term end result is lower wages for all workers. For students and young workers this means working extremely long hours just to make ends meet.

Age discrimination is just like all other forms of discrimination including sexism and racism. If we stick together we win. A win for young workers, is a win for all workers!



UNITE is a fighting union that represents workers in the fast food and retail sectors. UNITE is committed to abolishing youth wages, casualisation and low pay!

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