Off and on for the past 22 years I have been picking up unemployed kids on the road between Perth and Dalwallinu. There is a wave of youngsters on the road looking for work after each increase saw in unemployment. I first met them in 1961 when unemployment reached a post-war high of 3%—a figure just very nearly cost Menzies an election. Again around 1972 when unemployment reached 5%; again in 1975 when unemployment jumped to 7%; and now again when unemployment stands at 9%.

These kids are genuine work seekers; they would not be humping a pack on a cold road in winter if they were not. Although I’ve some experience of sleeping in the open I would not like to change places with them. (Just in passing, for the benefit of those up who won’t pick/hitch hikers I must say that although I have never picked up one or two who smelt a bit, so far as I can recall, I have never found one who was rude or in any way a nuisance.)

They are mostly easy to engage in conversation. Typically, they are not inexperienced in any calling; have little idea of life outside the city; inadequately dressed for the country, let alone the road; not very intelligent or well organised. In short, they would make relatively poor employees. Over the years I don’t think they have changed much even though with rising levels of unemployment one would expect a rising standard. It is also remarkable that their numbers seem to more closely relate to recent changes in employment levels than to the levels themselves. This last might be explained by arguing that high unemployment is discouraging increasing numbers from going to such lengths to find work and it takes another wave of previously employable jobless to put others on the road but I would like to see stronger evidence before making much of that argument.
The time of the 1961 employment crisis I employed several casual farmhands like these hitch hikers: today, so far as I can avoid it I don't. They have not changed but my farming practices have. Today we crop nearly twice the acreage with less than half the labour. Today we have a marked preference for experienced high quality men to work expensive equipment. Capital equipment has replaced labour but it is not the equipment that is the first cause of unemployment. There are obvious management advantages in not putting all the eggs in one basket. One big tractor can be very costly if it breaks down at the wrong time and is impossible brute when it gets bogged. is too big for the many light jobs. A second small unit is needed for those. Many of us resisted the capital expenditure as long as practical out the high cost of labour exceeded the high cost of interest and depreciation in spite of high interest rates.

Nobody asked them if they wished it that way or whether they might have preferred to gain experience in a low productivity, low paid job to unemployment. Instead we just enacted laws that effectively banned low productivity jobs by setting minimum wages above the level that low productivity support, condemning the least productive to unemployment and denying them the opportunity to improve their skills.

Trade Union officials, Industrial judges and politicians might try picking up a few hitch hikers on country roads then ask themselves if they have been fair to some of our weakest citizens. The right to sell one's labour is a basic human right which in Australia is denied by law. If our Constitution ever acquires a bill of rights then that ought to include the right to work.