

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

My daughter, then a student nurse, was approached by a union official seeking support for a campaign to increase the staff at Royal Perth Hospital. She agreed that on some wards the staff were overworked and proposed a salary cut to enable a proportionate increase in staff to be engaged from among unemployed nurses. The union official's response was that he did not want to hear from students.

The union is after all an association of employed nurses controlled by those senior nurses who are least likely to lose their jobs. The young have little say in its affairs; the patients none.

One quarter of all 15 - 19 year olds are unemployed and many people say this is a national scandal but will not accept lower salaries or wages. They avoid the question of wage rates by pretending that there is at any time a fixed number of jobs to be divided among potential employees.

By starting with an argument for more nurses the Nurses Union denied itself this retreat to Cuckoo Land. Clearly in the mind of the union there was useful work to be done but a shortage of money to pay for it. Since there is no end to human wants there can be no limit to useful tasks but there is always a limit to money and to the price that can be paid for any particular task. If there were an end to human wants then of course there would also be an end to pay demands, since people would have nothing which they wanted to buy.

If the price of workers is such that they cannot all be employed, then employers will naturally choose those who can/will produce most for each dollar outlaid. Less productive teenagers are forbidden to compete against adults by laws which prevent them from pricing their own efforts competitively.

Last year the Bureau of Labour Market Research produced a paper, Youth Wages, Employment and Labour Force, in which they reached the commonsense conclusion that youth unemployment has been adversely affected by the increase in relative youth wages in the nineteen-seventies.

Writing in IPA Review, Mr. Peter Ritchie, General Manager of McDonald's and possibly the biggest employer of fifteen to nineteen year olds in Australia, writes that on average he has more than seven hundred applicants every time he seeks seventy casual employees to open a new McDonald's.

McDonald's are not profiteering at the expense of underpaid youth. If these kids produced a lot for every dollar outlaid and were not available to McDonald's competitors then McDonald's would be on a good thing, but since Kentucky Chicken and other fast food outlets also may employ them, and since they prefer more mature workers, we must doubt that the kids are very productive.

Last year, in Britain, the electricians' union agreed to slash pay rates for apprentices from 37% of the adult rate to 25% and they have since agreed to a further reduction to 23%. The intake of apprentices has more than trebled from 800 to 2,700. In Australia, ACTU policy is to compel under seventeen year olds and first year apprentices to accept no less than 70% of the adult wage.

By denying some of our kids the right to become productive through experience we are streaming society into the haves and the have-nots alienating the unemployed from society and its values. Won't we show the compassion and sense of the British electricians ?