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Migration fix urged at job summit

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► Business calls for urgent ramp-up of skilled visas

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Employers are calling for an urgent ramp-up of skilled migrants as a priority fix at Labor's jobs summit in September as unions warn that they will fight for more safeguards to ensure temporary visa workers are not exploited.

Quick wins sought by business include a temporary two-year increase in skilled migration to 200,000 places a year, and making temporary skilled migration more accessible and responsive to employer needs by scrapping the so-called targeted occupation eligibility list.

An overhaul of the migration system is emerging as a headline issue at the summit, with changes likely in the October budget.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Treasurer Jim Chalmers said the summit would help drive reforms in participation, productivity, migration and women's economic security.

Mr Chalmers said the timing of the summit – which will involve about 100 business and union leaders, state governments and community groups at Parliament House in Canberra – before his first budget was no accident.

"We've deliberately chosen to put this jobs and skills summit on before the October budget because there may be steps proposed and agreed at the summit which could be implemented quickly," he said.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Andrew

McKellar said Australia desperately needed more workers.

"There are long-term solutions that should be identified, but quick fixes are also critical," he said.

Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott supported a temporary increase but said the summit was a chance to reset the approach across a range of critical areas while pursuing a broader reform agenda.

"Chronic worker and skills shortages, and supply chain challenges are pushing up costs and kneecapping productivity, so we have to double down on reducing friction and blockages in the economy," Ms Westacott said.

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That includes clearing the visa processing backlog and boosting access to four-year skilled worker visas to make uprooting families and moving across the globe more attractive to in-demand workers.

Steve Knott, chief executive of the Australian Resources and Energy Employer Association, targeted the "inefficient" and "time-wasting" skilled migration system, calling for the abolition of labour market testing and opening up skilled visas to all jobs over an

unspecified high salary.

Mr Knott said the time, cost and effort in sponsoring overseas workers was a more effective mechanism at recognising skill shortages than arbitrary timelines to advertise for local jobs.

He also said a complex web of occupation-based eligibility lists decided by bureaucrats was another big issue.

"When industry is calling out for supply of a particular skilled occupation in severe shortage, that should be evidence enough to make that occupation accessible to our skilled migration programs."

Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus said migration was one of the top three issues to fix at the summit, alongside the skills sector and a broken bargaining system.

The union leader said the migration system should be about "providing opportunities rather than exploitation" and should prioritise permanent migration.

"We have to change the system to ensure that migrant workers have the same rights and protections as any other Australian worker, and are brought in to fill genuine skill gaps, not to allow employers to evade legal minimum rates of pay or conditions," Ms McManus said.

Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union national secretary Steve Murphy said the summit was an opportunity to rebuild apprenticeships and fund the



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underfunded TAFE and training systems

He also said it should give more power to workers and take some away from employers: "We have a distinct power imbalance in our workplaces reinforced by tribunals stacked with

bosses. "We want to discuss how we give workers the tools they need to bargain for the things that matter most for their job, occupation and industry."

Master Builders Association boss Denita Wawn said "the ultimate test for the IR system must be to protect prosperity and ensure fairness by supporting growth and boosting productivity".

"All actions should be tied to achieving these objectives. Not to do so will undermine our ability to deal with inflation which hurts everyone in the economy," Ms Wawn said.

A Treasury white paper for wider engagement will be developed within 12 months of the summit.

Invitations and a final agenda are expected early next month, and senior ministers are leading working groups on the main challenges.

Brainstorm

The Jobs and Skills Summit will be held on September 1 and 2 in Canberra

Areas of focus		Ministerial responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeping unemployment low, boosting productivity and incomes Secure, well-paid jobs and strong, sustainable wages growth Employment opportunities for all Australians including the most disadvantaged Skills shortages and getting our skills mix right over the long term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving migration settings to support higher productivity and wages Maximise jobs and opportunities from renewable energy, tackling climate change, the digital economy, the care economy and a 'Future Made in Australia' Ensuring women have equal opportunities and equal pay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Katy Gallagher – Women's labour market experiences Tony Burke – Job security and wages Clare O'Neil – Migration Amanda Rishworth – Barriers to employment Brendan O'Connor – Skills and training Ed Husic – Renewables, digital and manufacturing

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