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Dear NZ Comrades,

The Victorian Branch of the TSCA has been inundated with emails from NZ in relation to the transfer from being paid employees to being subcontractors. It's impossible to answer them individually, so we'll give a broad overview of how the same situation in Australia has affected subcontractors.

At the outset, the proposal to be 'self-employed' can look quite attractive, and some people like the idea of running their own business. However, the situation for most is not that good and once people are committed financially for a van, tools etc, it's difficult to get out.

The contracts entered into are completely one-sided and subbies are entirely at the mercy of the prime contractor. Contracts are usually able to be changed with minimum notice and never in the interest of the subby. Rates are always being changed with some subbies complaining that they were earning more 5 years ago than they are now. Hours of work are changed regularly, the distribution of work is haphazard with some subbies running from one end of Melbourne to the other - and back again - to do jobs.

In Queensland, some subbies are now expected to work 3 out of 4 Saturdays and 2 out of 4 Sunday a month with the threat that if they don't do it they will be finished up. There is also the issue of fines for reworks etc. These are completely in the control of the prime contractor and some subbies have been fined with little or no opportunity for them to defend themselves.

Subbies in Melbourne and Queensland recently stayed off the job for a few days to have the situation addressed. Until then, management just ignored the complaints for month after month until they got a reaction from the subbies. Melbourne subbies had a victory, but only because they stuck together, and that's what NZ workers will have to do, and sooner rather than later.

Training is non-existent for Subbies and, if anyone wants to do a course, it's usually at your own expense.

Part of the problem is that prime contractors tender for the work in the first place and then have to compete with other companies down the track for the ongoing work. They compete with each other on price and it's usually a race to the bottom, and always at your expense. Every time a prime contractor loses out, the subbies are offered work with the successful tender. They are promised that 'nothing will change, rates will stay the same etc', but it never does.

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It's not a good situation for anyone to find themselves in - full-time job disappearing, and the need to continue to earn a living - with limited choice of employer.

Ideally, no one should sign a contract on an individual basis. We all know that we are at our strongest when we act collectively - and that's what needs to happen in this case.

The chance to have any real input to the contracts is NOW! The chance won't come around again once you are acting independent of each other, and they play you one out.

The best option is to join/maintain membership of the EPMU and present a united workforce to Vision Stream who are not known as being union friendly.

It's not a good news story, I'm afraid. Subbies in Australia have been belted left, right and centre over the years and the same will probably happen in NZ if the effort is not put in at this early stage.

We wish you well and hope that your experience is better than here in Australia.

Yours in solidarity



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TSCA

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