

Fightback campaign to sell benefits of China FTA

SID MAHER, The Australian, August 19, 2015

The Abbott government is about to launch a multi-million-dollar advertising campaign in support of the China-Australia Free-Trade Agreement as it confronts a fierce union campaign against foreign worker arrangements in the deal. The government advertising campaign will include television, print and online media and will be backed by more than 200 “roadshows” to sell the benefits of the deal.

The Australian understands industry groups plan to back the FTA with their own campaigns.

Coalition MPs are also planning a social media campaign against union claims that the China FTA will cost Australian jobs.

The government fightback comes as the electorates of backbench MPs are being bombarded by robo-calls attacking the FTA as part of the union campaign which has also included television advertising claiming the deal will jeopardise Australian jobs.

The government set aside \$24.6 million in the budget to promote the FTAs with China, South Korea and Japan to business. Trade and Investment Minister Andrew Robb yesterday told Coalition MPs the union campaign against the FTA was “dishonest”, declaring there would be no legislative changes to foreign worker arrangements as a result of the FTA.

He said there was not a “cigarette paper” of difference between the foreign worker rules for Chinese companies under the FTA and the existing laws governing 457 visas.

Mr Robb said there was “huge anger bubbling” in regional and rural communities who were “perplexed and angry” that unions would seek to deprive them of the opportunities that come with the deal. Mr Robb said any delay in the FTA would cost rural industries up to \$300m a year.

But opposition trade spokeswoman Penny Wong said the FTA would erode job opportunities for Australian workers. “Under ChAFTA’s Investment Facilitation Arrangements provisions the government has agreed to negotiate special migration arrangements for these projects with “no requirement for labour market testing”, she said.

But the government argues that labour market testing is still a requirement when a Chinese company seeks a labour market agreement to actually import foreign workers and nothing has changed in relation to the laws governing the use of 457 visas.

Mr Robb also attacked the Electrical Trades Union, which has claimed in robo-calls, that the FTA will allow unqualified Chinese electricians to work in Australia, potentially compromising safety standards. Mr Robb said it was extraordinary that the ETU was prepared to “trash its own industry”.

“They are scaring the daylights out of the old dears in my electorate and in many others around the country. It’s down-in-the-gutter stuff. It’s brought back memories of Labor’s Pink Batts disaster for them when homes did catch fire. They should be ashamed of themselves, because it is based on total lies,” Mr Robb said.

“The skills standards have not changed, Chinese applicants will be subject to the same process as applicants from 150 other countries, in addition they will need to obtain any required state or territory licences before they can start work,” Mr Robb said.

But Electrical Trades Union national secretary Allen Hicks stood by the union campaign. “It’s written in black and white, under the minister’s own hand, that mandatory skills testing is being abolished for electricians,” he said. “Proper skills testing is to be replaced with a paper-shuffle desktop audit by ill-prepared and under-resourced Immigration Department staff without specific knowledge of the skills and safety requirements of our industry.”

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