

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> July:

*Decent work: Nice if you can get it*

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'Unemployed at last!' Thus starts Joseph Furphy's great comic novel *Such is Life* (1903), and whose heart is not lightened by the prospect? All sane humans recognize work as a necessary evil, but then grimly recognize just how necessary it is. The fundamental reason for work is to fund one's addiction to groceries. However, there's so much more.

What is the more? And what difficulties arise when work does not provide a 'decent' living? Are we developing a system wherein work, especially for the unskilled does not provide enough money, predictability of hours, or cultural capital for respectable living? The globally mobile professional class has no trouble finding decent work, but what is the future for the less-equipped in society? Is it a future of generational unemployment, or of indecent work – long hours of insecure work for low pay?

It sounds bizarrely Victorian to talk of the dignity of work in our (supposedly) culturally relativist world, yet it is one of the fundamental glues of mutual respect in a complex society. Are we taking some perilous risks with this glue in the name of economic efficiency and productivity?

And what of the global inequity implicit in this desire to protect decent conditions in the West? Are Australian rules that ensure minimum employment standards a disguised form of protectionism that takes food off the table in homes in the developing world? Is 'decent work' merely a fetish of a former age when Australia was, in economic terms, really an island?