

“Putting mothers and babies under grossly unfair pressure”

By Tania Baptist
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The federal Labor government has announced a trial scheme which will strip teenage parents in disadvantaged areas of welfare payments if they fail to comply with compulsory “participation” obligations once their babies are just six months old. (See: “Australian government to stop welfare payments to teenage mothers”)

The WSWS interviewed advocates for single mothers and welfare recipients about the implications of the measures.

Josephine Clancy (now retired) was a founding member of the Council for Single Mothers and their Children (CMSC) in 1969.

WSWS: Could you tell me about the conditions for single mothers in the 1960s and 70s?

JC: Prior to 1969 the only income support unmarried women could get during pregnancy was unemployment benefit of \$10 per week, and after the baby was born an extra \$2.50 per week. Unmarried mothers were eligible for state benefits from late 1969, which were twice as much as unemployment benefits, but a lot less than the Commonwealth benefits available to divorced and separated mothers.

Often, they were expected to be a child-minder, housecleaner, cook and whatever else was needed for board and lodging, and they looked after their own baby in their spare time. So, a lot of young women gave their babies up for adoption, or tried very hard to bring them up but gave up after a while and ended up putting them in [State] care, especially if their parents didn't help them. And a lot of parents didn't—the religious and social aspects were massive.

We [the CSMC] were working for income parity for unmarried mothers with other sole parents for our children's sake, and of course equality of rights for our children because they were illegitimate. We got to the

stage where the Labor Party put it into its 1972 election policy, and eventually the other parties did too. So when the Whitlam government was elected, the Supporting Mother's Benefit, as it first was known, was brought into legislation in 1973.

WSWS: In the period from 1968 to 1975 there was a real upsurge in young people and the working class around the world, fighting for equality and better conditions...

JC: Yes, in the 60s very big social changes started happening, a fermentation of social change. The Whitlam government didn't spearhead it, but it was a focal point. We went on demonstrations and marches. We wrote to politicians and we knew they would respond with at least civility, and some of them would quite approve of what we were doing.

Nowadays you know you can't possibly influence the political system. Back then, you felt you could change the system with a lot of work, with a lot of carefully thought out submissions, with facts and figures and rational argument. But now it seems so hard to get anywhere.

WSWS: What do you think the impact of the government's scheme targeting teenage mothers will be?

JC: It is putting young mothers and their babies under grossly unfair pressure, and it seems harsh to say, but returning them to workhouse conditions, indentured labour. What sort of jobs are they going to get? There aren't enough jobs, or decent jobs or decent training programs. I suppose they'll do hospitality courses—that's what everyone does these days.

Being alone with a baby is very, very difficult. Putting high pressure on mothers from the first crucial 12 months of the child's life, which is so demanding, will have the ultimate result that, as they say, the

mothers will be left holding the baby. A lot of them will end up in [State] care.

Kerry Davies is a project worker/media liaison for the Council for Single Mothers and their Children.

WSWS: What do you think the impact of the governments' reforms will be?

KD: What's so despicable about this policy in the budget, is that the children are only six months old, they're still little babies. The figures show that teenage mothers aren't a big group of breast-feeding mothers, there are already so many barriers against them for that, and it becomes about the health of these children as well as the mothers.

The childcare issue is obviously the overriding one for all single parents, and access to quality childcare. Some people do make choices to leave children that young in care, but a 12-month-old is still a baby, they're pre-language. If you're not comfortable leaving that baby in care, then that parenting decision should be respected.

When these mothers are supposedly going to go back and finish Year 12, where exactly are they going to do that, and where is the childcare they can access?

WSWS: How do you think these girls will find trying to get a good job?

KD: The fact is that there aren't as many jobs as there are job-seekers. It's an increasingly casualised workforce and these are the people that are being pushed in and out of that. Usually if people find jobs, they're not secure, and they're not good quality jobs that have the flexibility they need as a parent especially.

We don't see how any of the measures will address people's real skill base. They've actually made access to education in a real sense a lot more difficult. You can't do certain diplomas because you can only get subsidised childcare for 12 months and you have to pay full price for childcare if you want to do a three year degree. This only allows people who are already on very low incomes to do courses that don't really give them good qualifications.

Leanne Petrides runs the Cranbourne Information and Support Services (CISS) which provides crisis support, information, referral and advocacy services.

WSWS: What impact do you think the government's reforms targeting teenage parents will have?

LP: People on Centrelink payments are doing the

very best they can with limited resources. They spend a massive percentage of their income on housing costs, sometimes 50 or 60 percent. On top of that they have utilities, food, medical and education expenses and these punitive measures will make it much harder for people.

Because of the housing shortage, Centrelink recipients are being priced out of the market. I would say that around 70 percent of people who attend our agency for emergency relief are driven by the fact that their housing costs are unaffordable.

Many teenage mothers live with their own family, so it's placing the pressure on their own families who might be dealing with their own issues of poverty. Or maybe they're living with the families of the father of the child. So you'll have extended families living in quite small houses. I've got a couple of cases that have 26 people in a three-bedroom house.

Rooming houses are springing up that are illegal and unregistered. We have a lot of young couples and families who are living in those, paying huge percentages of their Centrelink pensions on housing costs for one or two rooms in a crappy boarding house with a shared bathroom and kitchen. It places them in a position where they're in that cycle of poverty.

We have a real problem with payment suspension. Our society is supposed to be based on supporting people who can't support themselves. Punitive measures don't encourage people, and have the potential to lead to homelessness, entrenched poverty and over-reliance on agencies like ours.

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