

Australian dole recipients struggle to survive

By our correspondents
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The WSWs spoke with welfare recipients in Sydney and Melbourne about the Labor government's latest assault on social security. On January 1, thousands of sole parents had their pensions replaced by poverty-level Newstart unemployment allowances. On the same day, Families Minister Jenny Macklin outrageously declared that she could live on the Newstart allowance of \$35 a day for a single adult. (See: "Australian government cuts welfare payments to single parents")

Outside the Bankstown Centrelink office in Sydney, Sharin, a young single parent, was furious with the removal of the pension. "I just found out that I'll be going onto a Newstart allowance. I'm already struggling. I earn \$660 a fortnight but that is going to go down to \$480. So where the hell do I get another \$200 for my bills?"

"I've got two kids and I go to university full time. To earn \$35 a day doesn't even provide you with a full meal for you and your kids. I'm living with my mum under circumstances where I can't afford to rent. I can't afford textbooks. I have to scam off everyone else just to get by, so I can't reach my full potential."

Sharin condemned Macklin's comments. "Macklin wants to dumb down society to make people think they can do it, but you can't. At home our water bill is \$535. I don't even earn that by myself in a fortnight. I would like to work, but give me a job that doesn't lower my Centrelink payment, because I did that before and got into debt before trying to study."

Nolene, an unemployed 60-year-old woman explained her outrage at Macklin's comments. "I think what she said was rude and insulting to people generally trying to get by. I lost my job three years ago and since then I've been in and out of temporary work—three months here, six months there, a week there. I'm not eligible for an aged pension until I'm 65."

Sophie, an unemployed childcare worker on Newstart, explained her situation. "I want work—even something like packaging—but there isn't any work. I live at home so everything is provided for, but just to buy the groceries, milk, bread, vegetables would take \$35. Everyone out there is struggling to make things meet."

At the Broadmeadows Centrelink office in Melbourne, Jason, who was with his son Joshua [photo], said: "I'm a single parent and I've lost \$134 a week. I've calculated that after four weeks, that's one week's rent I've got to make up. I've got overheads and all that."

Jason spoke about the costs of raising a child. "I take my son to school by train. I can't afford the travel—it costs \$25 a week. The main bill I pay is electricity—it keeps the fridge going. I haven't been able to pay the gas bill for 12 months. I'm lucky I only have to pay \$250 a week rent. A lot of places are much more. With Joshua's school there is a new type of uniform they have to have. Just the jumper costs \$60. Black shoes are compulsory, but I can't get them for him. I'll probably have to find somebody to volunteer him some clothes."

Jason said he had been denied a disability pension, despite serious ill-health. "I've had a couple of heart attacks, but they won't accept my disability status. I go to my doctor and get certificates, and then they say they won't accept them anymore. I had to go to hospital five times in 12 months. I was told by my doctor, I'd had another heart attack. My health is dicey. I couldn't go to work in weather like this. I'm supposed to do 15 hours a week."

Vineto, who has been on Newstart for six years after losing his job due to a back injury, explained the problems he faces.

"I get \$220 per week. My girlfriend and I are just about to have a baby soon but we don't even have a

house, so we were forced to live with my girlfriend's parents for the last three years. My partner has to come to Centrelink and look for work even though she is pregnant. She has to put in for about 10 to 20 jobs per fortnight.

"We go without things, we have to stop going out and sometimes we can't afford petrol. Once we pay the rent and the bills, that's it. We only have a couple of dollars left over. I cannot afford to go on holidays; the furthest I go is to the shop and back."

Vineto said his situation was worsened by Centrelink's refusal to accept his back injury as sufficient to qualify for a disability pension. "I have a serious back problem and they still force me to work. I try to go to work, but I can't do it. I cannot do any heavy lifting. My back gave out on me due to repetitive lifting. I didn't get any compensation. I started working when I was 14. I'm now 22. I get medical certificates but they keep forcing me back to work. They expect me to do computer work, but I'm not qualified for that."

Glen, said he had been moved onto Newstart when his son turned six. "We definitely struggle. We've got to shop from the low budget shops and we have to buy home brands—we can't afford special labels." He added that sole parents already had a job—"bringing up children." He explained: "I take my son to school and back every day. I can't work unless it is part-time or else night shift."

Glen expressed disillusionment with the government. "I liked the Labor government, but not their policies on this. Why do it now to people? Why are they attacking children?"

Yvonne, a former retail worker now on Newstart, commented: "It's pretty hard to find work, especially the older you get. I pay \$250 a fortnight on rent, then there is food, gas and electricity and car bills. If you don't have the Internet, it is hard to look for work. They think that everybody has a computer and access to a phone. I have to get credit for that every month. I've been looking for work for two years. I've had health issues. I've only just got back to casual work—10 hours a week."

Yvonne was also angry with the government. "The cost of everything is going up, food, bills, but not wages. Yet politicians' wages go up. I'm not happy with the Labor government—they cut back on us, not

themselves. As the saying is: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer."

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