Struggle Street: Dehumanising the poor in preparation for new welfare cuts

By Richard Phillips and Chris Gordon
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Struggle Street, a two-part documentary screened last month on Australia's state-funded Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), is a patronising and demeaning documentary about the lives of about a dozen residents from the working class suburb of Mount Druitt in western Sydney.

The three-hour program features families and individuals, most of them receiving social welfare, attempting to deal with a range of social problems—unemployment, long-term physical and psychological health issues, teenage homelessness and substance abuse.

SBS and the British company KEO Films, which produced *Struggle Street* for the network, insist that the show "gives a voice" to "socially-disadvantaged communities." They assert that the program is not "voyeuristic" or "sensationalist" but an "observational" work that documents real-life events.

This is completely disingenuous. Whom the filmmakers chose to follow and what they chose to show, out of many hours of footage, were determined by a political agenda, which, while unstated, was clearly aimed at blaming the individuals for the many difficulties they confront.

Moreover, the very manner of presentation—individuals torn out of any broader social and political context—was aimed at deliberately obscuring the responsibility of successive governments for the social disaster wracking suburbs like Mount Druitt.

Struggle Street is not so different from a banal reality show where the TV audience is encouraged to applaud or condemn the various "life-style choices" made by those on the show. Real people were turned into crude stereotypes. The predictable outcome of *Struggle Street* has been the venting of often reactionary prejudices via Twitter rather than any understanding of the social conditions that produced the personal difficulties and tragedies.

Figuring prominently in *Struggle Street* is Ashley and Peta Kennedy who have ten children. Ashley was a truck driver until he suffered a brain injury, four heart attacks and arthritis. During production of the documentary, he was diagnosed with dementia and Alzheimer's. Peta previously worked in catering but is now Ashley's full-time carer. Their lives are in turmoil, struggling to live on her carer's allowance and Ashley's disability pension.

Ashley's son Corey, 32, is addicted to ice and has a girlfriend and an infant child. Chloe, Corey's 19-year-old sister, suffers from Aspberger's, epilepsy, depression and intellectual disabilities. Tristan, another son, who lives away from home, has brain damage from a motor bike accident.

Ashley, who was previously married, explains that his life and family began to fall apart when he was charged, convicted and jailed for 12 months after offering marijuana, which he used for health reasons, to one of his daughter's boyfriends, who turned out to be an undercover policeman.

Ashley and Peta are in constant conflict with Corey, who steals from the family to maintain his habit. There are furious arguments with Corey, in the house and outside in the street, and plenty of bad language.

The program makes no attempt to examine, let alone understand, what has produced these situations. How is it possible to survive on the pittance provided by welfare benefits? What tensions are generated by the constant lack of money, as well as battling with the welfare bureaucracy? What have been the experiences of the family with a public health system starved of funds? What led Corey to turn to drugs? And the list could go on and on.

Instead, in a disgusting display of insensitivity, the program chooses to show Ashley, obviously under extreme pressure and suffering from dementia, in the street with his tracksuit pants falling down and yelling abuse at his son.

Peta Kennedy publicly denounced the show, declaring that it "cruelly humiliated" her husband and further "tore apart" the struggling family. "We had no idea we were going to be portrayed this way," she said. Her daughter Chloe has been targeted by cyber-bullies since the broadcast.

Others are given the same treatment. William is an unemployed homeless Aborigine, who lives in the neighbouring bushland, and on other occasions at his sister's home. He reportedly supplements his diet by killing

native birds with a slingshot. Whether this is even true or not remains unclear. Yet William's decision to live in the bushland is presented as his individual choice, not the outcome of his social circumstances.

Bob, 47, and his pregnant girlfriend Billy-Jo both have substance abuse problems and live in a run-down public housing property. They are shown attempting to break into a locked room in search of marijuana. The heavily pregnant Billy-Jo and Bob are shown smoking marijuana—a scene that provoked a storm of Twitter condemnation. We later learn that Billy-Jo was born with a methadone addiction and had two of her children taken from her and put into state care.

Bob is in conflict with the state housing authority over unpaid rents and attempts to make him pay for repairs that it never carried out. This information is a brief mention of the impact of the relentless cutbacks to essential government services—in this case public housing which is badly maintained and is being sold off.

As a counterpoint to the tales of failure and dysfunction, *St ruggle Street* highlights a couple of stories of hope. Bailee, a 16-year-old homeless girl and former ice addict and rape victim, and Chris, a 22-year-old with learning difficulties from a broken family, are trying to claw their way out of poverty. This serves to underscore the subliminal message that there are 'deserving' and 'undeserving' receivers of social welfare. Individuals, not the present social order, are to blame.

It is no accident that *Struggle Street* was commissioned last year following Australian Treasurer Joe Hockey's calls for an end to "the age of entitlement." The first part of the show was broadcast the week before last month's federal budget, with the final part screened the following week. The budget made another $1.7 billion reduction in welfare spending over the next four years, targeting so-called "welfare fraud" and "non-compliance."

Notwithstanding SBS's claims, *Struggle Street* is not an innocent, non-political work. The show, in fact, is cut to a template developed in Britain and whose examples include *Skint* (also produced by KEO Films), *Benefit Street*, *On Benefits and Proud*, *We Pay your Benefits* and several others. These programs emerged in the wake of the global financial crisis and the Tory government's massive inroads into social welfare and other essential services.

Struggle Street feeds directly into the reactionary ideology of "individual responsibility" which is central to the justifications of governments around the world for the never-ending cutbacks to welfare. Only those who are prepared to help themselves, like Bailee and Chris, deserve a little assistance. The rest should be cut off support, or subject to other punitive measures. That is the conclusion that viewers are encouraged to draw.

Sensitive to the impact of *Struggle Street* on the image of the area and no doubt local business interests, Blacktown mayor Stephen Bali denounced the show as "poverty porn" and organised a protest of council garbage trucks outside SBS studios in Sydney before the broadcast of the first episode.

Bali, however, is a member of the Labor Party, which at the state and federal level, is directly responsible for the social crisis in western Sydney. Labor governments, in league with the trade unions, have presided over one round of job destruction after another, particularly in manufacturing, as well as the undermining of public housing, health care, education and welfare.

In a comment on *Online Opinion* last week, Alex Sanchez, a local Labor official and advisor to former federal Labor leader Mark Latham, made the attitude and social agenda of the Labor Party abundantly clear. He attacked those criticising *Struggle Street*, saying they were involved in "pointless strutting" and "a culture of complaint."

The public housing estates in areas like Mount Druitt, he declared, were government-funded "soviet style enclaves" that "should be abolished altogether" and replaced with "private sector solutions." In line with the *Struggle Street* theme, he justified his pro-market proposals for education vouchers and penalising parents for drug and alcohol abuse in terms of "individual responsibility" to encourage the deserving and punish the undeserving.

All of this seeks to obscure the actual cause of misery, distress and hardship, which lies in the bankrupt profit system. Even as the global economic crisis worsens, the 200 richest families and individuals in Australia increased their wealth by more than a billion dollars last year. At the same time, the demands of big business for austerity continue, and poverty-level benefits and wages are further cut.

No doubt, as the social divide between rich and poor continues to widen, more pro-austerity propaganda will be churned out. Spurred on by the ratings "success" of *Struggle Street*, Channel Nine has brought forward its scheduled broadcasts of the British documentary series *Life on the Dole*—a "documentary" in the same genre.