

Australian budget: Drug-testing intensifies war on welfare

By Mike Head
12 May 2017

A key feature of this week's Australian federal budget is a brutal assault on jobless workers, including an unprecedented plan to potentially cut off welfare payments to those who fail tests for certain types of illicit drug use.

As well as being targeted for invasive drug tests, the country's nearly 800,000 unemployed workers and youth will be forced to spend many more hours per week fruitlessly looking for work and will have their benefits arbitrarily suspended for missing official interviews.

With nearly 20 jobless workers for every employment vacancy—because of the ongoing destruction of full-time jobs—these measures are blatantly aimed at humiliating, vilifying and punishing the jobless, and stripping them of basic legal and democratic rights.

The government and employers want to increasingly force the unemployed into low-paid jobs on insecure, super-exploitative conditions. This will further drive down wage levels, which are already falling in real terms, while slashing social spending in order to cut taxes for big business and wealthy individuals.

In a two-year trial, some 5,000 people receiving below-poverty line Jobseeker Payments or Youth Allowances will be subjected to testing for cannabis, methamphetamine and ecstasy use. Saliva, hair follicle and urine testing will be administered by a private contractor, during Department of Human Services interviews.

This sets a far-reaching precedent. What will be next? Drug-testing for access to the government's Medicare healthcare system? Or for other fundamental civil and political rights, such as the right to vote?

Despite the government claiming that jobseekers will be picked randomly for testing at three unnamed

locations, they will be selected using a “profiling tool” designed to target those known to suffer from addiction and related health problems.

According to a press release by Social Services Minister Christian Porter, the program will feature “a data-driven profiling tool developed for the trial to identify relevant characteristics that indicate a higher risk of substance abuse issues.”

Health and welfare workers criticised the tests for targeting marijuana, ecstasy and methamphetamines—cheaper drugs used commonly by people from lower socio-economic backgrounds—while not detecting alcohol, or cocaine, heroin or other drugs that are more expensive.

Drug use and mental health experts also pointed out that treatment and rehabilitation facilities for drug dependence are notoriously scarce and, where they do exist, either inadequate or expensive. People cut-off their benefits, mostly suffering from addiction, are likely to be thrown into destitution, homelessness and petty crime.

Yvonne Wilson, CEO of Griffith-based welfare support agency, the Linking Communities Network, asked: “What's going to happen to those people? Are they going to be left without an income? How are they going to pay their rent? How are they going to buy their food? How are they even going to get to the rehab centre, if that's what they want to do to turn their life around?”

People who fail a first test will be placed on “cashless” welfare cards and have their welfare quarantined from buying drugs or alcohol. Those who test positive twice will be referred to a doctor for substance abuse treatment, as a condition for retaining access to payments. If they fail to adhere to a treatment program, they will be subjected to payment

suspensions and ultimately cancellations.

In addition, so-called alcohol or drug abusers will no longer receive exemptions from “mutual obligation” requirements, such as turning up for appointments or looking for work, because of their dependency issues. Those receiving slightly higher Disability Support Pensions on the basis of their addiction problems will be cut-off or thrown onto the lower Jobseeker Payments.

Similar programs imposed in the US, Britain and New Zealand in recent years have been used to drive people off welfare and into marginalised existences, not decent jobs.

Knowing this, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull defended the plan in the face of widespread outrage on the day after the budget was delivered. He declared: “The lesson is don’t do drugs. The bottom line is if you’re on welfare, what you’ve got to do is get off welfare and into a job.”

Jobseeker Payment recipients will also have to spend much more time looking for work or toiling on “work for the dole” programs. Around 270,000 people aged between 30 and 49 years of age will be forced to spend 50 hours a fortnight—20 hours more than they do currently.

Those aged 55 to 59 will no longer be able to volunteer for selected charities or services to meet their 30 hours of “mutual obligation” requirements, with some possible exemptions. The jobless over 60 will have to do 10 hours of activity, with volunteering still included.

In addition, a “three strikes and you’re out” policy will be imposed on those who fail to meet these onerous requirements or miss appointments. After one failure, they will lose half of their welfare payment for a fortnight. After another, they will be stripped of the entire payment for a fortnight. If they fail a third time, their payments will be cancelled entirely and they will have to wait a month to apply again.

To further compel the jobless to accept low pay and poor conditions, anyone who turns down a “suitable” job will have their welfare cut for at least a month, and will need to reapply to reactivate their payments.

Social Services Minister Porter was asked on Thursday what he thought constituted a “suitable job” and whether, for example, aeronautical engineers would need to take jobs in cafes to avoid punishment.

Porter said that any job was better than welfare. “This notion that there’s a perfect, or better or worse job, is not one that we accept,” he said. His reply was revealing. It provided a glimpse of the reality, in which highly qualified university graduates are being forced to take cheap labour jobs.

Taken together, these “compliance” measures are forecast to cut welfare spending by \$632 million over five years.

Trials of the government’s “cashless” welfare cards, first inflicted on indigenous people, will be extended to June 2018 and spread to two more locations. A related “income management scheme”—also dictating what welfare payments can purchase—will be extended for three years in 14 targeted working class areas.

Another \$84 million will be cut by merging seven types of welfare benefits, including Newstart jobless payments, sickness benefits, widow pensions and partner allowances, into one Jobseeker Payment. It has been set at the Newstart level, which has been frozen in real terms by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments since 1994.

As well, the Department of Human Services, which includes the Centrelink payment agency, will shed 1,188 jobs next financial year, having already suffered 5,000 job cuts since 2014. This will add to the pressures on welfare recipients, as well as the department’s workers. No less than 36 million phone calls to the department’s agencies went unanswered last year.

In a display of ongoing bipartisan support for the deepening war on welfare, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten backed ratcheting up the “mutual obligation” compliance measures, and refused to rule out voting for the drug-testing legislation. “Yes to mutual obligation, but just to be demonising one group of the population, let’s just wait and see,” he said.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>