

Complaints soar against Australian government's welfare agency

By Mike Head
7 November 2017

More than 55 million phone calls to Centrelink, the Australian government welfare office, were met with a busy signal during the 2015–16 financial year—nearly double the 29 million a year before. A Senate estimates committee was belatedly told last month of this extraordinary rise, which had been hidden from public view.

Millions of welfare recipients were unable to get through to the agency that administers their payments, causing enormous frustration, anxiety and anger. Already struggling to survive on benefits that are far below the poverty line—single unemployed workers receive less than \$40 a day—they were forced to spend hours waiting on phones.

This is another measure of the Liberal-National Coalition government's contempt for those who depend on welfare, especially unemployed or disabled workers, and aged pensioners, as well as its determination to push them off benefits. In effect, the phone logjam is the latest in an endless series of moves by successive governments, both Coalition and Labor, to slash welfare spending at the expense of the working class.

Being unable to contact Centrelink can have serious consequences for some of society's most impoverished and vulnerable members. This includes being cut off benefits for failing to report information, or being unable to complete applications for benefits. In the same year, the government accused tens of thousands of welfare recipients of falsely claiming payments worth \$2.8 billion.

The government's hostility toward social security dependents was further displayed at the Senate hearing. Department of Human Services official Renee Leon blamed automatic dialling apps for the sharp rise in failed calls.

“That's not 55 million unique calls,” Leon told senators, asserting that about 20 percent of the calls were from repeat dialling apps. She stated: “55 million doesn't mean there were 55 million people who tried to ring, because many of those were repeat calls.”

If people are using repeat dialling apps, it is because they know, from bitter experience, that they cannot contact Centrelink without resorting to such devices, which keep calling a number until it is ultimately answered.

Even according to official statistics, phone waits averaged almost 27 minutes at the height of the past year's “robo-debt” outrage, when the government sent out 20,000 automated “debt notices” every week, demanding that current and former welfare recipients repay hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of dollars.

Seeking to intimidate people relying on pensions, unemployment benefits or other welfare payments, the government hired corporate debt collectors to hound them. It has also threatened to jail people unless they paid the demanded amounts or produced documents to disprove any alleged over-payments. Tens of thousands of people were wrongly accused of defrauding the welfare system, including disabled workers with mental health problems.

This is under conditions in which the ongoing destruction of jobs in manufacturing, mining, retail, public services and other basic industries has created mass unemployment in many working-class and regional areas, especially for young people. Currently, about three quarters of a million workers rely on the meagre Newstart (unemployment) allowance, under constant threat of being penalised or cut off altogether unless they pass onerous and often humiliating “work tests,” such as attending interviews, applying for 20 or more jobs a month, or performing unpaid charity work.

Recipients can have their benefits suspended or terminated for failing to notify Centrelink if they miss an appointment or interview, even because of ill-health or family emergency. Thus, not being able to phone Centrelink can result in being “breached,” leaving recipients in severe financial stress.

Anger over inability to contact Centrelink is just part of the seething discontent over the calculated mistreatment of welfare recipients by the government, through Centrelink. Recently released figures show complaints about the agency jumped by more than 50,000 in 2016–17.

The Department of Human Services’ latest annual report revealed that complaints rose to 168,709, from 113,746 in 2015–16. One in four complaints related to dissatisfaction with a decision, outcome or payment, including payments not being received.

About 28 percent of the complaints related to concerns about a claim, application, or assessment process. Centrelink’s jammed phone system was the subject of 16.2 percent of the complaints, which included concerns about wait times, engaged signals and call disconnections.

Centrelink workers also are paying the price of the government’s cost-cutting. Nearly 1,200 jobs were axed from the Human Services department in the Turnbull government’s 2017–18 budget, on top of about 5,000 job cuts since 2014. This ensures lengthy delays and destroys more working-class jobs. The remaining over-worked Centrelink staff are left to face the justified outrage of those trying to access basic social security rights.

Even worse is being prepared. Human Services Minister Alan Tudge recently announced a three-year \$51.7 million contract with Serco, a global corporate services company, for a pilot program in which it will take over some of Centrelink’s phone-call facility. In what the government termed an unprecedented move for Centrelink, 250 Serco call centre employees will take calls about welfare payments. To extract profits from this take-over, Serco will only further run down the service provided to callers.

Tudge declared that this out-sourcing was the answer to the phone jam problem, thus seizing on the suffering the government itself has caused to pursue an obvious corporate agenda. The agreement with Serco, which has also profited from contracts to operate the

government’s refugee detention centres, is another step toward the complete privatisation of government services.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), the main trade union covering the Centrelink workers, and most public sector workers nationally, has called for talks with the Human Services management. While publicly condemning the Serco deal, the CPSU will continue to stifle the opposition of its members, as it has done with all the previous job cuts.

The CPSU backs the return of another Labor government, but Labor is equally committed to further attacks on welfare. Last September it helped the Turnbull government pass an omnibus savings bill, cutting \$6.3 billion from social spending over four years. Labor supported provisions such as 9 percent annual interest charges on alleged unpaid welfare debts.

The attack on welfare recipients is bound up with a wider offensive against the working class as a whole. Governments and employers want to increasingly force the unemployed into low-paid jobs on insecure, super-exploitative conditions. This is driving down wage levels, which have fallen in real terms for several years, while slashing social services in order to cut taxes for big business and wealthy individuals, and pour billions into military spending.

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