

Australian government pushes drug testing for welfare recipients

By Oscar Grenfell
16 September 2019

The Liberal-National Coalition government is pressing ahead with a plan to introduce mandatory drug-testing for around 5,000 recipients of the Newstart and Youth Allowance welfare payments in working class areas of Sydney, Queensland and Western Australia.

The measure, contained in legislation the government has reintroduced to parliament, is aimed at expanding “welfare quarantining” and further punishing the unemployed and the poor.

In a clear indication that the government’s laws are only the first step in a broader onslaught, a meeting of the Nationals’ Federal Council on the weekend passed a motion calling for all recipients of parenting and unemployment welfare under the age of 35 to be paid through cashless debit cards that can only be used in certain stores.

Under the government laws, two year drug-testing trials would begin in the Queensland regional city of Logan, along with Bankstown, a suburb in Sydney’s south-west and Mandurah, a coastal city in Western Australia.

The targeted areas have all been hit by the decades-long assault on manufacturing and industry, spearheaded by Labor and the unions, which has resulted in rising poverty, unemployment and complex social problems. In Bankstown, unemployment rates for 18–24 year-olds have been estimated at up to 30 percent.

Under the scheme, welfare recipients in the trial areas would be subjected to “random” drug testing.

Anyone who tests positive for an illicit substance would have 80 percent of their welfare payment quarantined for the next two years. Those who test positive twice within a 25 day period will be “referred to a medical professional” and could be forced into

rehabilitation programs. Refusal to take a test would result in the immediate cancellation of all payments.

The government has sought to justify the policy by claiming that it is responding to “community expectations.” It has also stated that a testing regime will reduce rates of drug use.

These assertions have been rejected by welfare groups, which have noted that the government claims are not based on any evidence. In reality, the measure is aimed at stigmatising welfare recipients, scapegoating them for social issues caused by job destruction and government funding cuts, and forcing the unemployed off any government benefits.

This is of a piece with the government’s broader pro-business agenda, including the introduction of sweeping tax cuts and legislation aimed at creating the conditions for workers who organise industrially and politically.

The drug-testing legislation has previously been blocked twice in the parliament, as a result of widespread public opposition.

Right-wing populist MPs, however, including representatives of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and the Centre Alliance, have signalled that they will back the measure this time around. The position of these right-wing MPs underscores the fraudulent character of their occasional populist rhetoric.

For their part, Labor MPs have made tepid criticisms of the welfare measures. Labor leader Anthony Albanese has, since the party’s federal election debacle in May, spearheaded a shift even further to the right, including by backing the government’s tax cuts.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper has labelled the welfare legislation the latest “test” for Albanese to demonstrate his pro-business credentials.

Even before the latest measures, Australia has one of

the most punitive welfare regimes in the developed world.

Successive federal governments, Labor and Coalition alike, have effectively frozen the payment rate for the Newstart unemployment benefit since 1994. The result is that the payment is the equivalent of less than \$40 a day for a since adult. This has led to a poverty rate of at least 55 percent among all Newstart recipients.

A paper released this month by the Australian National University's centre for social research found that on average, households that depended on government welfare as their main source of income were forced to live at \$124 a week below the poverty line in 2017. The gap increased by 389 percent from 1993 to 2017. In 1993, the figure was \$25, in 2003 \$55 and in 2009 \$98.

The paper identified the refusal of governments to raise welfare payments as being the cause of growing poverty, amid a rapidly rising cost of living and soaring housing costs. It stated: "The driver of this increase is the lack of real income growth for these households."

A separate report, prepared by Monash University academics last month, pointed to the social consequences of this grinding poverty. It found that Newstart recipients were 6.8 times more likely to describe their health as "poor" than those in the workforce. Almost half of Newstart recipients reported that they had experienced "mental or behavioural problems."

A series of interviews by the *Guardian* last month documented the immense hardships confronting the unemployed.

Lisa Carberry, a 48-year-old Newstart recipient in Geelong, explained that after housing costs and outstanding bills, she had been left with just \$10 for the next fortnight. "I have to either not pay a bill or access charities for food and things in order to continue to tread water," said Carberry. "That's really what it is. It's treading water. It's not swimming." Other interviewees were suffering homelessness as a result of not being able to pay the rent.

The poverty-level of the Newstart payment is one aspect of a protracted assault on welfare. In 2012, for instance, the Gillard Labor government kicked 100,000 single parents off their benefits and onto Newstart, slashing their income by an average of more than \$100 per week. Successive Coalition governments have

similarly sought to impose sweeping cuts to welfare.

A key turning point was the introduction of "income management" for welfare recipients in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities by the Howard Coalition government in 2007. The measure, backed by the Labor opposition, was part of the police-military takeover of Aboriginal community under the banner of the Northern Territory (NT) intervention.

The blatantly discriminatory "income management" regime has intensified social problems in the region, and has created immense hardships for welfare recipients, who are only able to use their cashless debit card at a handful of select stores.

The renewed push for welfare quarantining underscores the warnings made by the WSWS since 2007, that the measures associated with the NT intervention were a test case for broader attacks on the entire working class.

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