

A reactionary consensus on 'work-for-the-dole'

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Even a few years ago, any political party in Australia would have hesitated before proposing to impose work-for-the-dole schemes for the unemployed, fearing a possible public outcry from working people, welfare groups and the trade unions.

Such schemes, after all, recall the bitter experiences of the working class in the Great Depression of the 1930s. In conditions when the jobless rate hit 30 percent, the unemployed were forced to do hard, and often dangerous work on government-sponsored projects in order to earn 'sustenance' for their families in the form of food vouchers.

Yet since Prime Minister John Howard announced an expansion of the current work-for-the-dole program for unemployed youth in his Liberal Party policy launch over the weekend, there has not been a murmur of opposition. So far to the right has the agenda of official politics shifted that compulsory labour conscription for young people is advocated by all the major parties as a 'solution' to the high levels of unemployment.

Far from opposing the scheme, Labor spokesmen have insisted that the Liberals are not going far enough. Interviewed on ABC radio on Tuesday, Labor leader Kim Beazley explained that his party was not against work-for-the-dole and would not change the Howard government's scheme. His only objection was the name which he characterised as 'demeaning'.

Beazley boasted that the previous Keating government had been 'tougher' on the unemployed. Its One Nation program had introduced 'reciprocal obligation'--those long-term jobless who did not participate in the cheap labour training programs were cut off all unemployment benefits.

At his campaign launch Beazley unveiled a renamed work-for-the-dole scheme--Training for Jobs--which in all its essentials is identical to the Howard government's plan. In addition, Labor released details of its Community Jobs program aimed at forcing older unemployed workers into low paid, menial work for local councils and community organisations on road gangs and community cleanups.

We now have the spectacle of Labor and Liberal seeking

to outdo each other to force young people to work for a pittance on work-for-the-dole schemes. The very parties that have presided over the demolition of hundreds of thousands of full-time jobs over the last decade and created youth unemployment levels of up to 60 percent in working class areas, want to shift the blame onto the jobless themselves, saying they lack motivation or a 'work ethic'.

Under the Howard proposal, the present work-for-the-dole scheme will be expanded by 25 percent to encompass 125,000 young people. Year 12 school leavers will be targetted in particular. If they fail to get a job or undertake further study within three months of finishing school, they will be compelled to work-for-the-dole.

Since July 1 this year the Howard government has required all young unemployed between 18-24 who have been out of work for six months, to undertake either work-for-the-dole or voluntary work in return for unemployment benefits.

The claim that youth receive training is a sham. In the period 1997-1998, 179 work-for-the-dole programs have been implemented--mostly involving unskilled manual labour. The schemes have included building new fences, gardening, road and rail maintenance, school and house repairs, library assistance and odd jobs for the elderly. They are poorly supervised and sometimes dangerous.

Under the schemes, a body of cheap labour is being created which will be used to undermine the jobs and conditions of older workers. Already local councils and government bodies are exploiting the unemployed to avoid employing fully paid workers. As one group of trainees completes their compulsory six month program, another group is sought from the local case manager. As the scheme expands, private business will undoubtedly seek to benefit from this growing pool of low wage labour.

For young people living at home, payment is a maximum of \$87 for a working week of at least 12 to 15 hours. Those who refuse to take part have their payments cut by 18 percent for six months, for their first 'offence'. Subsequent 'breaches' result in a complete cut off.

Since July 1, parental means testing has been applied to all

unemployed youth aged between 18-20. As a result, 13,000 youth were cut off payments altogether, and another 33,000 have had their benefits reduced. Means testing begins at a parental income of as little as \$23,400, imposing further burdens on already struggling working class families.

The Liberal government plans to save \$428.1 million over the next four years by reducing unemployment payments for young people. At the beginning of next year, all unemployed youth aged between 16-17 will lose their benefits unless they agree to undertake full-time education or training. At least 7,000 young people will be compelled to go back to secondary schools and TAFE colleges.

Even at school, young people will be used as a source of cheap labour. As the Centrelink website explains: 'You can split your week between school and work. If you're in Year 9 or 10 you could do work experience in a job you like. In year 11 and 12 it can be one or two days each week getting practical experience in the workplace, or doing accredited vocational courses that you can continue when you leave school.'

Work-for-the-dole was not simply a product of the Howard government. In 1977 the Fraser Liberal government initiated the first pilot program for Aboriginal people under the Community Development Employment Projects. The scheme was vastly expanded by the Hawke Labor government in 1983 to 18 remote Aboriginal communities. In 1986-87 it was expanded again from 63 to 92 communities and by 1991, CDEP encompassed 20,000 Aboriginal people in 185 communities.

After the 1993 elections, the Keating government set out to impose similar schemes on the long term unemployed. Under the guise of providing training, young people were shunted into Labor's various Working Nation schemes. The National Literacy Enhancement Program, for instance, provided cheap labor for the schools. In some cases youth, working a full week for no more than an additional \$40 on top of the dole, were expected to take classes, clean schools, and shift equipment.

None of these work-for-the-dole schemes could have proceeded without the backing of the ACTU and the trade unions. In the case of the National Literacy Enhancement Scheme, the Australian Education Union acted as the overseers for the Labor government. Now as youth are being dragooned into a form of labour conscription which will further destroy the jobs, wages and conditions of other workers, the trade union bureaucrats are completely silent.

Furthermore, Labor is preparing to extend the principle behind the work-for-the-dole scheme to other welfare beneficiaries. Labor's Education spokesman Mark Latham has already called for all new forms of welfare to be based on a system of 'reciprocal responsibility'. In other words, all

welfare recipients will be obliged to work to repay the government for the financial assistance they receive.

Latham is seeking to provide the ideological justification for the unrestrained operation of the market and the destruction of welfare and other social services such as health and education. The principle of 'user pays' or 'individual responsibility' is being used to dress up policies which are diametrically opposed to the interests of millions of people. It constitutes a return to the reactionary outlook of last century when the poor were held to be responsible for their own poverty, through malingering, immorality and other 'sins'.

Unemployment is not an individual problem but is a product of the social system based on private profit. The vast wealth created by the working class has to be controlled by the producers themselves and used to provide a secure, well-paid job and decent living standards for all.

In order to provide full employment, the Socialist Equality Party advocates the reduction of the working week to 30 hours, with no loss of pay, and the establishment of a program of public works to provide decent housing, transportation, child care, hospitals and schools. Moreover, we call for a minimum wage of \$20 an hour to ensure that all workers are able to provide for the needs of themselves and their families.

Instead of being made the scapegoats for high unemployment, youth must be given the opportunity to pursue their interests, develop their skills and fulfill their potential. All work-for-the-dole and cheap labour schemes must be immediately abolished, and proper training and education made available to all youth on full pay.

Dole payments and other welfare benefits must be raised to the level of a living wage. At the same time night work and rotating shifts for all young workers must be prohibited and a reduced working week established with no loss of pay to allow them to engage in sports and other recreational activities.

See Also:

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