

# The New South Wales Labor government's "drug summit"

11 February 1999

To the editor,

In the leadup to the elections in the Australian state of New South Wales on March 27, nothing is more sickening than to view the way politicians exploit human misery in their scramble for votes.

A little over a week ago, the knee-jerk reaction of the Carr Labor government to a front-page photograph of a teenage boy shooting up heroin (the Sydney Sun-Herald, January 31) was to shut down the needle-exchange facility in the inner-city suburb of Redfern.

Responding to the photograph, Health Minister Andrew Refshauge was quoted as saying: "It is a horrendous, horrendous thing. To see children taking heroin just compounds that feeling. I think the system has failed this youngster and I think we need to do better."

To what "system" is Refshauge referring? He is organically incapable of linking the youth's addiction and this economic system based on profit. Presumably he was referring to the government's "system" of dealing with the huge social problem of addiction to heroin and other drugs.

Let us examine a few facts relating to this "system":

1. Needle-exchange programs are at best an ad hoc approach to "harm minimisation," one of the elements in the strategy of the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia. However, statistics appear to indicate a reduction in HIV and hepatitis B and C infection since needle exchanges began.

2. Since its initial reaction, the Carr government has announced a limited re-opening of the Redfern facility at a new site, only to deal with residents of the local area. But the increase in the number of infected addicts caused by sharing needles in the interim will never be known.

3. For an addict or alcoholic to gain admission to a detoxification centre is now more difficult than it has

ever been, since this health service first became available. In recent times, owing to funding cuts, many centres have either closed or had the number of beds drastically reduced. At the end of this week, the Wisteria Centre at Parramatta, which for years provided an intensive three-week program for alcoholics and addicts, will close. The government's "system" is providing for the opening of a 25-bed facility at Westmead Hospital, and patients can only stay four days.

4. Waiting lists for treatment are now the order of the day. These were introduced to conceal the real impact of the cuts. The fraudulent strategy originally mooted was that detoxification centre staff would be better able to ascertain whether patients were "genuine" in seeking recovery before they were assessed. This is akin to a patient at casualty with a suspected broken limb being told to wait and see if it turns gangrenous before it is X-rayed.

5. Any drug or alcohol counsellor worth their salt knows that many patients seek recovery upon experiencing a personal "rock bottom". This window of opportunity can be lost forever if the sick person has to wait. Consequently, overdoses and deaths have become common among those awaiting assessment.

The Carr government has announced a "Drug Summit" to be held after the election. Not to be outdone, the opposition leader Kerry Chikarovski has responded with a call for a summit **before** the election.

A summit is a peak--a pinnacle. In the realm of human endeavour, Leon Trotsky spoke of mankind's "right to be proud ... (of) giants of thought and action who tower over their contemporaries like summits in a chain of mountains" ( *In Defence of the October Revolution*, New Park, London 1971, p. 12).

One is left to ponder just which "giants of human thought and action" from either Carr's cacophony of

confidence tricksters or Chikarovski's court of chicanery would convene such a meeting.

No doubt there would be those who would be willing to attend the summit sincerely seeking a solution to what is a tragic societal malaise. They would be sorely disappointed.

Carr and Chikarovski, regardless of all their hot air, are dominated by the immediate needs of capital. Hence, the relentless assault on all the past gains of the working class, including in the key area of health, must be continued and intensified.

The proposed summit is nothing more than a cynical attempt to create, in the minds of prospective voters, an illusion that a "summit" is needed to transform Carr's and Chikarovski's "concerns" about this tragedy into action. Nothing could be further from the truth.

RW



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