Interview on closure of Australian job agency:

"The government's concern is to drive people off benefits"

25 June 2002

The following is an interview with a former Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) worker, Robyn, who worked for the Australian government-run job agency for 17 years. After being made redundant in 1995, she worked as a case manager for SkillShare, a government-funded, community-based placement agency for just over a year.

WSWS: What is your opinion of the government's decision to close Employment National?

Robyn: I think the decision to abandon all direct government job assistance to the unemployed completes a shift that has been going on for over two decades, ending an entire period following the war when governments were committed to the provision of full employment.

It amounts to a total rejection of the conception that unemployment is a product of the type of system we live under and therefore the government has an obligation to provide assistance to people who are affected by developments outside of their control.

Over the past 25 years that conception has been increasingly under attack in order to bring about a shift. Unemployment and other social problems are blamed on the individual. There is something wrong with them— they're lazy, they don't work hard enough or their moral standards are not good.

Basically, what we see now is strict and impersonal case managing and punitive measures against unemployed people for even minor breaches. This is essentially going back to the conception behind the Poor Laws, where welfare was not a right and was only provided to the so-called deserving poor.

WSWS: What are the repercussions of handing over job assistance to private organisations and subjecting it to the profit motive?

Robyn: It has a major affect on the type of service delivered and how it is delivered. To move away from the type of public sector delivery that we had with the CES means there is no longer the provision of services with very clear rules and a universal application. Under the old system, an unemployed person in one location would get the same services as one in any other area. That is not the case now.

With job assistance farmed out, those principles disappear because the different private organisations have their own priorities, their own policies and even their own set of moral standards when dealing with the unemployed.

Operating on the profit motive means that the agencies concerned will be looking at the bottom line—how to cut costs and increase their return. This leads to "creaming". People who are more difficult to place in a job, who might require more time, investment or training, which all eats into profit, will be left sitting around in favor of placing more job-eligible clients to ensure quicker returns, which can be worth up to $10,000.

Also, whereas the CES attracted people who were genuinely concerned about the unemployed and the disadvantaged and were dedicated to assisting them, I believe private agencies will attract a very different type of person or impose such conditions as to make any expression of concern impossible.

WSWS: When you worked in the private area was that kind of thing prevalent?

Robyn: Not in the organisation I worked for because I was the only person who was doing case management and my philosophy was that people got equal treatment. People who had particular difficulties got the training and assistance they needed. However, even then it was

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a very different period. There were still some options and public sector community-based training programs around.

That has changed drastically. The program of "reciprocal obligation" brought in under Labor introduced the concept that the unemployed had to do something in return for benefits. They had to take a suitable job or training placement if it was offered.

Under the Howard government this changed to "mutual obligation" and work-for-the-dole schemes where the unemployed are obliged to take any kind of job and refusal could lead to them being cut off benefits.

Job providers are contracted directly to the government. They operate within the terms of the contract and carry out government policy. The overriding concern of the government is to drive people off benefits and to provide a massive pool of cheap labour for business.

This is why the breach rate is so enormously high and why thousands of unemployed people are being breached for the most minimal offences.

For example, young unemployed people are required to apply for 12 jobs over each two-week period. Under conditions of extremely high unemployment and limited job vacancies, maintaining this type of application rate is terribly difficult, if not impossible. People can be, and are, breached for not achieving this.

WSWS: Did the union conduct any campaign to oppose the closure of the CES?

Robyn: The union accepted that the CES was going close and be replaced by Employment National and that a lot of the functions previously done by the CES would be taken over by Centrelink.

The union just concentrated on the conditions of employment for people who stayed with Employment National and on securing a redundancy package for those who left. [There was] some kind of agreement for those people to return to the Public Service if Employment National closed in the future. I believe that even this last condition is under challenge and has been the subject of a court case for the past two years.

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